

MATVEI TEVELYOV



HOTEL

in

SNEGOVETS



**"True, every bird praises its own nest, yet surely nowhere but in our Carpathians are there such vast mountain forests, such mineral springs bubbling from the ground, or such mysteriously beautiful summer days when the mountains, the distant alpine meadows, and the tiny patches of plough-land, distinctly outlined, shimmer blue in the heat haze.**

**"If you look at our forested Carpathians from the distance, they seem smiling, peaceful and easily accessible. . . . Plunge into them, however, and you will find yourself in a world of dim ravines and roaring mountain torrents, and your heart will stand still at the sight of the ancient beeches and spruces, so huge that you wonder how they can keep their hold on the steep slopes."**

**M. TEVELYOV**

Stretching along the southwestern part of the Soviet Union, bordering upon Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Rumania, is a chain of green mountains and a narrow strip of flat country. This is Sub-Carpathia—the youngest of the Ukrainian regions.

Matvei Tevelyov—journalist and writer—has walked many a road in this region, staying for long periods in the out-of-the-way villages of Verkhovina—as the mountainous part of the country is called.

*Verkhovina, Our Land So Dear*—his first big work, was published in 1953. It is a poetic narrative of the Carpathian people's past (the reader perhaps is acquainted with this book through our translations of it into English, French and German).

The stories included in the volume *Hotel in Snegovets* are dedicated to Sub-Carpathia's "today," to its woodcutters, ploughmen, raftsmen, carvers—to its simple people and their dreams, their thoughts and their work.







W. W. Webb



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**MATVEI TEVELYOV**

**HOTEL  
IN SNEGOVETS**



**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE**

**M o s c o w**



**МАТВЕЙ ТЕВЕЛЕВ**

**ГОСТИНИЦА В СНЕГОВЦЕ**

Рассказы

**TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY O. S H A R T S E**

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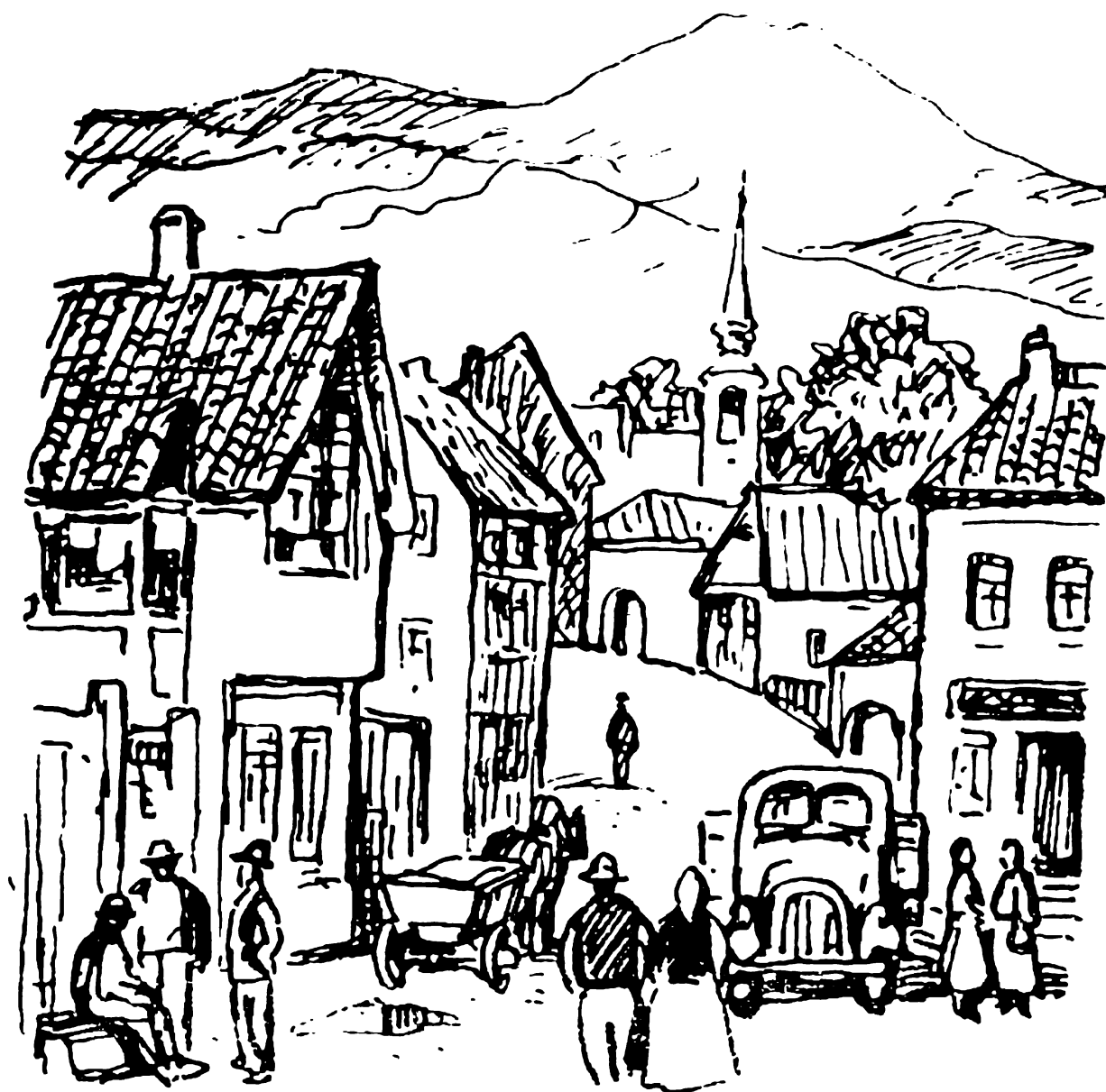


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### BY WAY OF A FOREWORD

Never is man more talkative and confidential than when he is travelling. Sometimes you find yourself telling a fellow-traveller something that you would not even reveal to your dearest friend.

Is not someone you have just met for the first time and whom, perhaps, you will never meet again, the best possible confidant of what you have already told more than once but which still lies heavy on your heart? On whom, if not on him, should you pour out your stored up experiences, the stories you have heard, or—if it comes to that—a bit of boasting too?

Travelling does not merely imply movement. Whether you are waiting to change trains, trying to hitchhike at some cross-roads, or are staying the night at an inn or a roadside hotel—it all comes under the heading of “travelling.”

We have a place called Snegovets, a district centre, in the Carpathian Mountains, not far from the pass. It can hardly be called a village any longer, but it is still rather premature to call it a town. It stretches from north to south along a perverse little river: abounding in water when nobody wants it, and mean with it when the water is desperately needed by the local power station. High mountains of incomparable beauty are all around. They begin almost on the threshold of the cottages, and sweep up sharply to the sky, and stand clothed in dark, slate-black conifer forests, intermingled with bright squares of corn-fields, wrested from the forests, and alluring alpine meadows.



Snegovets is a stopping place. Roads lead from it in all four directions. You do not usually have to wait more than fifteen minutes at the cross-roads by the bridge to be picked up by a timber-carrier with clattering, heavy chains, or a collective-farm cart, or the co-operative store lorry, impregnated with that smell peculiar to village stores whose stock-in-trade consists of kerosene, haberdashery, coffee and mint biscuits of an uncertain age.

But towards nightfall traffic dies down—the steep mountain paths are too dangerous in the dark. Belated motor-cars and lorries, overtaken by the night in Snegovets, park along the side of the street, and all the rooms in the little hotel are taken.

The inhabitants, like all small-town local patriots, have a weakness for exaggeration: “our park here,” they say, and you see a square planted with young trees; here’s our “stadium,” and your gaze meets a stamped out pasture; “our palace of culture” . . . which is nothing but a club, reconstructed without undue expense out of a former warehouse. But even the most ardent patriots of Snegovets lack the courage to call their hotel—a hotel. The reception clerk’s window, a corridor with rooms opening into it, a lounge with the inevitable copy of Shishkin’s “Morning

in a Pine Wood" on the wall—all this is a matter of the not far distant future, for in the centre of the town masons are already roofing the new hotel building.

But in the meantime . . . a rickety, steep staircase will bring you up to the second floor into a long room with rows of narrow iron beds placed closely side by side. In the corner of the room stands a pail of cold water and a stool with a wash-basin and mug on it. The place smells of plaster and freshly scrubbed floors.

This is the hotel in which I have stayed for long periods at different seasons of the year.

My Snegovets friends looked upon me as something of a curiosity.

"Why do you have to put up with all these inconveniences?" they would say to me. "Why don't you rent a room in a private house? It's like living in the street where you are."

But I stuck doggedly to my hotel and I do not regret it. I have long forgotten all the inconveniences, but the people I came across at the hotel and the stories I heard there remain in my memory and are as dear to me as an old friend on a long and difficult journey.





## MIRACLE

**T**here is a short but wonderful moment early in the morning, which I would call the moment of anticipation. It does not last long and in life's haste or in ordinary surroundings it often flashes past us unnoticed.

In Snegovets, for instance, this moment comes after the sawmill whistle, resembling the crowing of a young cock, has sounded down the valley. The whistle dies away and silence, as unreliable as a thin thread, falls over Snegovets.

In fair weather, neither sleep, laziness nor fatigue can make me resist the temptation of getting up at this early hour and going out on to the balcony which stretches along the second floor of the hotel. From here you can see the whole of Snegovets and the mountains hemming it in.

The sun is not up yet, but its pale, golden light is already dispersed in space. The last of the night's shadows seem to stagger blindly into the forests ranging down the mountain slope in a solid wall. The narrow streets are deserted. The houses look sleepy and seem to feel chilly in the mountain coolness, the way a man feels when he throws the covers off his feet in his sleep: he feels cold but does not know why.

But no, nothing sleeps any longer. Everything is awake and stands spellbound in anticipation of a miracle never known before. Day is ahead! And this is like youth, only then it's life that is ahead.

And the seed of the miracle is already stirring in every living soul. It is ready to sprout, so that later during the day, as its strength grows, it

may bring joy to everything that comes in touch with it.

But the trouble is this: a day comes to an end and though you believe that you have done everything you ought to have done, there has been no miracle. When it wilted within you, you cannot even tell. You only know it did not sprout, it did not bring you joy....

Of course it is not a question of a single day. Sometimes it's a day and sometimes it's years and the only difference between them is that man finds it easier to think with regret of one wasted day, than with bitterness of a senselessly squandered life.

What has hindered the growth of the miracle? What was lacking? I have often pondered over this, but the answer always seems to evade me.

Two of the hotel's guests came out with me one morning to watch daybreak in Snegovets. They had both taken part in a plenary session of the District Committee of the Communist Party which had ended the previous day. One of the men was Dr. Nikolai Avdeyev, a corpulent man with closely cropped grey hair. Twelve years or so ago Avdeyev, then a lieutenant-colonel in the Medical Corps, was in charge of the medical unit of a guerilla formation fighting in these mountains. When the war was over Avdeyev asked to



be appointed to work in the Carpathians. In Uzhgorod they gave him the choice of any hospital there. He walked up to a map on the wall and poked his finger at the most out-of-the-way village in Verkhovina,\* a God-forsaken spot, as they used to say.

"There's no hospital there," he was courteously informed.

"We'll build one!" Avdeyev replied.

"There's no provision for it in the plan," he was told.

"Trousers are cut to fit a man, and not a man to fit his trousers," Avdeyev muttered angrily.

He went to Kiev and Moscow and worried the authorities for two months until he finally had his way. And then Avdeyev was appointed physician to the rural hospital he himself had built.

The doctor had lost his family in the war. He lived all by himself but he always tried to be with people as much as possible.

His one attachment was an old, squat, chestnut army horse called Mishka. After the war Mishka had been "written off for soap," but having been rescued and nursed back to health by the doctor, was serving him loyally to this day.

\* Verkhovina—the mountainous part of Sub-Carpathia.—*Tr.*

In the mornings Mishka would open the wooden latch on the stable door, climb the steps hewn in the rock up to the doctor's small house on top of the hill, and wake Adveyev by pushing its nose against the window-pane.

Mounted on Mishka, his legs dangling on one side of the saddle, the doctor made his rounds. He did not wait for patients to come to him, but sought them out himself and rated them soundly for their carelessness, as though it was Avdeyev himself who was sick and the one he was scolding hindered his recovery.

The other guest, who got up at this early hour, was Fyodor Subbota, a wood-carver, famous in the district or, perhaps, all over Verkhovina.

On more than one occasion at the exhibition of national art in Uzhgorod, I had admired his work: ornaments on wooden platters and shepherds' crooks, figure groups and bas-reliefs. I did not know Fyodor Subbota personally and only met him for the first time at the plenary session of the District Party Committee. I must admit that I expected to see a man who was getting on in years, but instead I saw a tall, black-eyed lad of twenty-three or so, with a direct look in his eyes and a light, swift gait. From his whole appearance one guessed him to be an independent

sort of character, who knew both his worth and his limitations.

He was foreman of a tractor team at a Machine and Cattle-Breeding Station in the mountains. Subbota joined it on graduating from the middle school of his native village. People advised him to continue with his studies, to enter some art institute or other in Uzhgorod or Kiev, but Subbota did what he thought best.

"I decided to wait," he told me afterwards, "to listen to what was going on. . . ."

"Going on where?"

"Within myself."

Subbota found the work of a tractor-driver to his liking. He cared for his tractor with the somewhat naive fondness of youth. But this did not interfere with his devoting all his spare time to carving, which had been his hobby since he was a child.

Wherever he went he carried his carving tools with him, and his pockets always bulged with small blocks and pieces of wood: he had everything handy in case he happened to have a spare moment, all he had to do was sit down and start carving.

Although he was so young, he already had quite a large family. It was said that he had married for love—a widow with two children of her

own. A year later she presented Subbota with a third. It was his wife's likeness Subbota had carved out of a block of hardwood: a young woman sitting on the porch steps, nursing her child, her fine, sweetly smiling face raised upwards, not towards the sky, but to a man. The man was not in the group, but you could feel him there. He stood over his beloved and he must have been saying something very tender to her, something important to both of them.

The director of the station asked Subbota to give him this figure, and he placed it not at the club, but at the office, in the room where tractor-drivers received their orders for the day. It has been standing there for over six months now, and according to the assertions of an old order clerk, it exercised a very favourable influence on all those who were there. "You'd feel ashamed to say a coarse word in her presence, or throw a cigarette stub on the floor, and apart from that you feel happier and there's less formality," he said.

And so it happened that Fyodor Subbota and doctor Avdeyev came out on the balcony with me that early morning.

The silence which fell after the whistle had died away was again broken by a melodious sound like that made by great old-fashioned



locks when the key is being turned in them. And then something hummed and droned as though a top had started spinning: this was the engine of the secretary's car starting up. Then gravel hissed on the road: a flock of workmen riding bicycles, luncheon baskets and thermos flasks tied to their baggage carriers, sped down the street towards the sawmill. There came a fragrance of freshly baked bread and the sound of women's voices. The skinny delivery man from the local grocery store wheeled out his barrow, loaded with blue siphons of aerated water, and started off on his daily calls at Snegovets offices. A column of lorries loaded with timber rumbled over the temporary wooden bridge and began the climb to the pass.

"Day has begun!" said Subbota and grew pensive. "What will it bring us?"

"What we ourselves will give it," replied the doctor.

"You're right," Subbota agreed, "one reaps what one sows. . . . I can't get Kovalets out of my mind. . . ." he added.

"Yes," agreed the doctor, "a riddle if ever there was one."

And again the conversation turned to the subject we had talked over almost the whole night through.

The report made by Vasily Kovalets—secretary of the Party organization of a large collective farm in the mountains—was one of the items discussed at the recent plenary session. Although my acquaintance with Kovalets was not a very close one, it was of long standing, ever since he had first come to work on the District Party Committee and later had studied in the Regional Party School. Kovalets was a middle-aged sturdy man, rather clever, energetic and persistent, and he was said to be endowed with the enviable ability of quickly mastering any job. Because of this Kovalets was continually being switched from one job to another. Someone on the committee had nicknamed him the “draught horse.” And that was just how it was: wherever things were going badly or needed a pull, they would send Kovalets. And he really did straighten out the difficulty and push the job through. From time to time, it is true, the District Party Committee received complaints that Kovalets was rough, that he did not give due consideration to the opinion of others.

“Well, but a man’s no angel,” they would say. “He may be rough, he may even be snappy, but look how the work has picked up!”

A year ago Kovalets had been elected secretary of the Party organization of a large and back-

ward collective farm. Shortly afterwards the farm's business began to improve and it was already in the air that Kovalets should be switched over to another tight spot. But it worked out differently. Rusinko, the former secretary of the Snegovets District Party Committee, came back from a three-year course of study in Kiev and was once again elected first secretary. And he was the one who stood up for Kovalets.

"Have a heart, comrades!" Rusinko said to the members of the committee. "Give the man a chance, he's had enough of this switching around. Why, if the farm's doing well that's good, so let Kovalets go on with the job."

After that, however, something inexplicable happened. The farm that had about righted itself, began to lag again in spite of the fact that Kovalets worked with his former energy and zeal or, rather, with intensified energy and zeal. Party secretaries and instructors came to the farm to find out the cause of Kovalets's failure, but they were unable to find anything. Everything was in order, whatever Kovalets planned was carried out to perfection. This perfection and accuracy could well be envied by many. Even at the plenary session they could find no fault with his report, and the investigators corroborated all the statements made by Kovalets. And although

the word "insufficiently" was often repeated in the final resolution passed in connection with the report, yet everyone, including Kovalets, felt that the crux of the matter was not in these "insufficiencies" at all, but in something else, something very important and so far elusive.

The plenary session was over. A new day had dawned but we were still talking about Kovalets.

"Well, what should the man do now?" doctor Advzeyev asked, addressing no one in particular. "What is the conclusion?"

"But perhaps he shouldn't do anything," said Subbota.

"Now, now," Avdeyev objected, "you can't really take Kovalets's ability away from him, can you? There must have been a reason for his success before."

"He was a success, of course," Subbota agreed. "And I believe I even know how he achieved it: by frightening, shouting and banging on the table. It works for a short spell, but in the long run there's not a hope!"

"Now, now," Avdeyev said again but with less confidence, giving Subbota a curious glance over the top of his spectacles.

Then the doctor shifted his heavy gaze to me and asked:

"You were telling us last night about the anticipation of a miracle, and the miracle—that's talent, isn't it?"

"Certainly," I agreed.

"And what is talent? Is it ability alone? I've known quite a number of people who were perfect at both rhyming and painting and yet they were neither poets nor artists even though they had their poetry published and pictures exhibited. Therefore there must be something else besides ability...."

"Love for the work," said Subbota.

"Of course," the doctor nodded, "but if you put it this way then I, too, might be numbered among the talented: I for one would never give up my work for any other. And Kovalets, too, has his ability and love for the work...."

"There are different kinds of love, doctor," said Subbota. "There's father's love and there's uncle's love." And after a short pause he added: "But as for anticipating a miracle—that's true, and it's also true that a miracle is like a little seed. When it comes to an ordinary seed I know what is needed to make it grow, but with one like that I don't.... Oh well," he made a hopeless gesture, then looked about him with a smile, "there's more food for thought than we can manage. It's time to begin the day."



The doctor went off to the District Health Department on his business, I remained at the hotel to write an article for my newspaper, and Subbota, who was planning to go home the next day, went along to carry out his friends' shopping errands. I came across him at the store about noon, where he was buying all sorts of things, an impressive shopping list in his hand. He bought two hats, a washing board, some razor blades, a mincing machine, a baby's bathtub and some gramophone records. I stood, unnoticed, beside him for a few minutes and admired the genuine pleasure with which he was doing it, assuring the salesman that he was buying presents for his numerous relatives.

It was only late at night that we all met at the hotel again. Subbota, who was to start on his journey at dawn, was the first to retire. The other hotel guests followed suit, but I, as usual, settled down to wait for the last radio news bulletin, and doctor Avdeyev stayed with me. I generally listened to the broadcast from the balcony, where I could hear the voice of the announcer coming from a loud-speaker mounted on a pole in front of the hotel.

When the news came to an end and the announcer started reading the weather forecast, someone sat down beside us on the bench. It was

rather dark and I did not at once recognize Subbota. But it was he, barefooted and wearing a jacket thrown over his naked shoulders.

"Listen," he said hurriedly, "I think I understand it now."

"What is it you understand?"

"Why, everything!" Subbota replied. "You must listen to what I have to tell you about a certain Ivan Palitsa. He lived at Huszt two hundred years ago, although originally he came from our parts. At that time the barons and counts owned castles along the Uzh and the Tisza and the Latoritsa. Palitsa was a young fellow at the time and he was apprenticed to a carpenter.

"The plague struck the Tisza one spring. It mowed the people down just like that man over there is mowing grass. People ran helter-skelter, fleeing from the disease, but wherever they went they were met by armed troops who barred their way. The lords hid themselves on their estates and the old count, who lived in those parts, a harsh man but a learned one, locked himself in his castle. He was not so much frightened for himself as for his young wife, whom he had taken from common stock, but for all that the most beautiful girl in the district.

"And this was the woman Palitsa met. He did not meet her in her castle but out in the road.

She was walking alone, fearlessly entering houses where people lay awaiting death. She neither prayed nor lamented over them, but helped them in any way she could, putting heart into them with a cheerful word and angrily scolding those who were resigned to death. And wherever that woman went a rock remained, and a scythe will not mow down a rock.

“Palitsa saw all this and he followed the woman like a shadow follows man.

“When the old count discovered his wife was gone, he rushed out to look for her himself. He found her.... He begged her to come back to the castle, he tried to bring her back by force, but she resisted him.

“As for Palitsa.... He had seen this woman before when he had been working at the castle with his master. He had seen her but had given her no thought. But now she filled his heart and no power on earth could have torn her out of it.

“The epidemic began to die down but towards the very end it took away the old count’s wife.

“People thought the old one would not survive this loss. But time heals all wounds.

“And then the count summoned the best goldsmiths of Mukachevo and Huszt to his castle. They came and he said to them:

“ ‘Take my gold and cast me an image of my wife. You will remember her for you have known her. There has never been anything more precious than her in my life, and she is worthy of gold.’

“The goldsmiths went away and set to work. A month or two later they came back to the castle, each one bringing what he had made. The works of the masters were very good. Every one of them showed the count’s wife in death, with her eyes closed, and for a long time the old man could not make his choice, so beautiful were these sculptures. Suddenly the count noticed a stranger standing there, holding something in his hands covered with a kerchief. The count knew all the goldsmiths by sight, but this man he had never seen before.

“ ‘Who are you?’ he asked.

“ ‘Ivan Palitsa, a carpenter’s apprentice from Huszt.’

“ ‘What have you come for?’

“ ‘I brought my . . .’

“He threw back his kerchief and everyone saw a young woman’s head carved out of a block of hardwood. Her hair, so people said, fluttered in the breeze, her lips were whispering words of kindness and her open eyes held hope in them.

The miracle of it was so great that the goldsmiths stepped back, while the count cried wrathfully to Ivan Palitsa: 'You loved her! I can see you loved her!' "

And Subbota, deep in thought, repeated these words several times.

We fell silent. And only doctor Avdeyev's drawn out sigh broke the spell.

"There's your answer to everything," he said. "It makes wood more valuable than gold, and craftsmanship turns to art, and the tiny seed of a miracle becomes the miracle itself. And we did not see the most important thing about Kovalets ... the most important thing!"

The night was starry and a soft warm breeze was blowing. The mountains appeared to grow lower. They seemed to be tired after the long day and were now sitting down round Snegovets, the way shepherds sit round their fires in the fields, ready to start up with the first rays of the sun and welcome the day on their feet.





## MAN'S WORTH

**I**n Studenitsa, but what's Studenitsa, in the whole of the Snegovets District you could not find a better looking fellow than Andrei, Olyona Stefak's son.

Everything about him was good—his bearing, the fine lines of his tanned face, his keen grey eyes, and the sharp angle of his left eyebrow, which gave his face an expression either of surprise or mockery.

Andrei Steiak was not only known as the most dashing young fellow, but the greatest dandy as well. Perhaps not many of Verkhovina's prettiest girls took so much care of their looks and clothes as did this nineteen-year-old tractor-driver from the sawmill in the mountains. He wore a white cloth jacket with green lapels, a shirt embroidered with glass beads, a hat trimmed with a fir twig, and hobnailed highland boots. His walk was light and unhurried, and one sensed a studied carelessness in the way he wore his clothes.

"What's the matter with you, Andrei," Fyodor Skripka once asked him, "all decked out on a week-day as though it's a holiday?"

"I have no week-days, *Vuiku*,"\* the youth replied seriously. "All days are holidays to me."

Although Andrei rarely danced, he never missed a party or a wedding. He would come in, stand by the wall and, chewing a blade of grass,

\* *Vuiku*—(uncle)—a form of address used by young people to older men.—*Tr.*

would watch the dancers with something like surprise on his face.

The girls went mad about him. But had Andrei offered marriage to one of them, the girl would have thought twice before giving him her word. She would have thought and sighed about it, would certainly have shed tears, but still she would not have risked marrying Andrei.

"You'll come to grief with a man like him," the older women said. "It's torture marrying such a handsome man, and this one, besides, has a mean tongue in his head and an icy look in his eye."

However, it was not the women alone who held this opinion of Andrei Stefiak. Even Gorulya, who never drew hasty conclusions about a person, considered that there was nothing but looks and impudence in Olyona's son and felt very sorry about it.

Gorulya was once coming back to Studenitsa from Snegovets. He was given a lift in a lorry delivering machinery to the farm's dairy.

It was the middle of March with an unexpectedly early thaw. There was a drizzle in the valley, but up here in the mountains sleet had been falling for two days now. Everything looked dingy and dull. The small mountain streams swelled

and the slim wooden bridges thrown across them quivered under the impact of the rushing water. Heavy dampness seemed to know no bounds, it even seeped into the driver's cab.

Gorulya sat next to the driver, shivering from the cold and listening to the edges of the canvas hood flap in the wind. And then, as ill luck would have it, something went wrong with the engine. While the driver, cursing and swearing, repaired the damage, foggy twilight fast set in. The headlights were powerless to pierce the dusk and the thick curtain of wet snow. And Studenitsa was still a long way off.

At last they moved on. The road climbed higher and higher up the mountain. The engine roared with the strain. The nearer they got to the pass the stronger blew the wind and the thicker fell the wet snow.

Gorulya watched the skill with which the driver manoeuvred his lorry up the intricately winding road, and grunted appreciatively at every deftly engineered turn. In spite of his age Gorulya still retained his faculty of being amazed at every sort of skill in others, especially the kind he himself did not possess.

And there was the pass. The lorry crawled on to it slowly, straining all the strength it could muster. The light of the headlamps, which

seemed diluted and greasy, slid from right to left and suddenly picked out of the night a figure of a man walking towards the lorry. The man stepped off the road and stood on the edge of the precipice.

"Who could it be in weather like this?" Gorulya asked in surprise.

The driver applied his brakes, the lorry stopped and he opened the door. And only now that the engine was stilled, Gorulya heard how furiously the wind was howling in the pass.

"Hey, stranger," Gorulya called to the man. "Where are you bound for?"

"Not far," a calm voice returned, "to the settlement."

"But who are you?"

"Why, don't you recognize me?"

Gorulya peered at the man as he came up to the lorry.

"My, but it's you, Andrei!"

"It's me, *Vuiku*. Well, good-bye!"

"Wait, what the devil d'you want to go to the settlement for?"

"Oh, nothing special," the youth replied casually, "just to have a fling."

"Hell!" Gorulya flared up and spat on the ground. "There's no holding a scapegrace like you!"



Andrei burst out laughing, but suddenly stopped and, as though overcoming an inner resistance, said in a low voice:

"All right, then. I'm going to Stepan Ostrovka's."

Gorulya sat up in alarm. He knew that old Stepan's daughter had been seriously ill for over a year now. She had for a long time been in the Uzhgorod hospital, and then taken to Kiev for an operation. There was not much to be hoped for from the operation, but it was the last attempt to save the life of the young girl, suffering from a terrible disease.

"And what do you want with Ostrovka?" Gorulya asked.

"Nothing," Andrei replied coolly. "I was at the Village Soviet when a telegram came through for the old man. Everything's fine, Gafia will be all right."

"That what it said?"

"Aye," Andrei nodded.

"And so you're taking the telegram to him?"

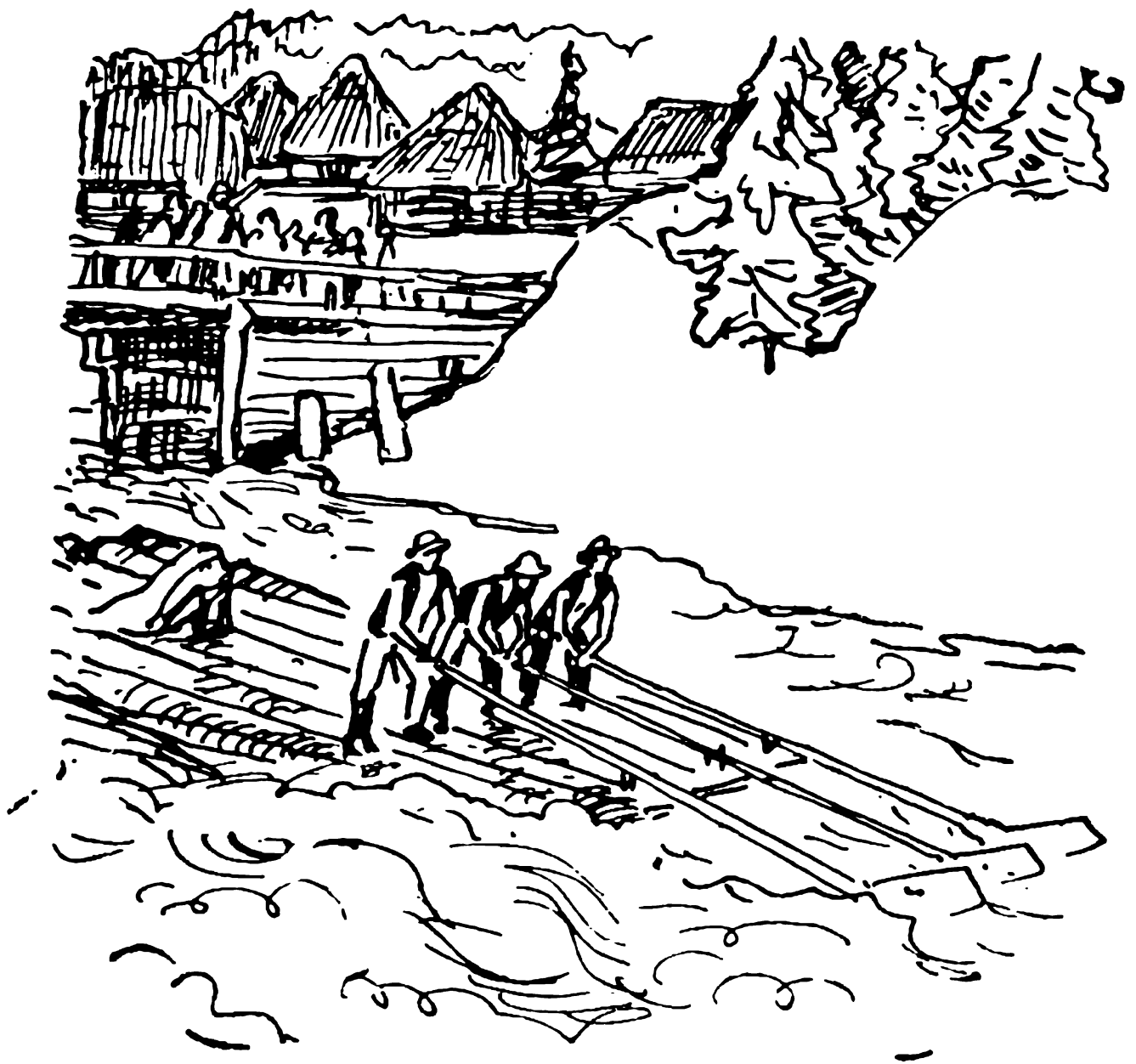
"Why should it lie in the office till morning?" Andrei replied. "The old man's nights are longer than ours. . . . Good night!" And, pulling the brim of his soaked hat down over his eyes, he walked away.

They were silent during the rest of the eight-kilometre way to Studenitsa. Every now and then the driver stopped his lorry to wipe off the wet snow plastering the wind-screen, and it was only when they were driving into the village streets that Gorulya suddenly broke the silence.

"Mikhailo!" he called to the driver, as though he was not sitting beside him in the cab.

"I'm listening, Comrade Secretary," the driver replied.

"This is what I'd like to tell you," Gorulya spoke thoughtfully, "if ever you want to learn the real worth of a man, bring him close to another's sorrow or joy. You'll never go wrong!"



### BY THE WHITE TISZA

The White Tisza took his two sons—Pyotr and Semyon—fifteen years ago.

They were floating timber down to Velikoye Bychkovo during the spring floods. Swift moving

icy waters roared and frothed on the rocky shoals. The narrow Carpathian valleys were filled with the din and the rafts, steered by the Hutsul raftsmen, moved at such speed—scattering splashes and a rainbow spray—that even a horse-man could not have kept up with them.

Young boys and old stay-at-homes from the riverside villages came running down to the edge of the water to meet the rafts.

“Lo-o-ok out” came the warning shouts of the old raftsmen, who in their time had also floated timber down the White Tisza.

“Lo-o-ok out!” the young boys—raftsmen of the future—smartly echoed the shouts of their elders.

But even without this warning the raftsmen, soaked to the bone, stood with their legs far apart, straining their bodies forward like skiers coming down a steep slope, a searing pain in their eyes from watching the river, and kept a tight hold on the long rudders placed at the head of the rafts.

One raft followed another with a few minutes’ safety interval. They dived under the quivering little bridges thrown across the river, the men squatting while the log flooring rushed over their heads and then, like released springs, shooting up again to their former positions.

The raft driven by Pyotr and Semyon was a double one; the main raft, made up of twenty-four fir logs, hauled another one after it. A forked plank was stuck between the logs of the head raft and on it hung their two white jackets, trimmed with green flannel, and a canvas bag with bacon and corn bread.

When the raft was rushing past their village, Semyon, the younger one—a slightly pock-marked stripling—saw a young woman standing on the shore, holding a child in her arms. She stood up on a boulder and, screwing up her eyes in the sun, held out her baby to let him see the raft.

“Hey, Pyotr!” Semyon called to his brother, “there’s your Olyona on the shore with Yurko!”

“Stop gaping!” Pyotr snapped at his brother, although he himself would have liked to look at his wife and two-year-old son. He pulled down the brim of his faded hat to screen his eyes from the blinding glare of the water.

Old Mikhailo Belanyuk, the boys’ father, was following with his raft five minutes behind them. He was not so very old at the time, but the glory of the best raftsman on the Tisza made people speak respectfully of this small, slight man, courageous and nimble in spite of his fifty-five years. The river had no rapids, rocks or shoals that Mikhailo did not know. He was familiar with the

temperament of this small but dangerous river, as though she had lived in the house with him; he knew when he had to use cunning with her, when to win her over with strength and directness, and when to trust himself entirely to her current. Did he love her? This was something old Belanyuk never thought about. And what was there to love her for when she took husbands away from wives, lovers away from sweethearts, and every year added new crosses to those in the riverside cemeteries. True, it had been merciful with Belanyuk's family: both his father and grandfather had died a natural death, and here was he floating timber with his sons without mishap. Mikhailo knew the river's true worth and his attitude towards it was simple and business-like.

Mikhailo was strict with his sons and proud of them, although he never spoke about it to anyone. They were brave, hard-working boys. His wife had died young, he had not married again and had brought his children up himself. On warm summer days he would take the little boys by their hands and go down to the river with them. Picking out a flat wave-washed rock, he would stand his sons upon it and wash them with the icy water.

Had it been one of the other raftsmen doing it, he would have been ridiculed and given a fun-



ny sort of nickname for his unmanly occupation, but since it was the King of the White Tisza himself doing it (so the foresters called Belanyuk) it was quite a different matter.

When Pyotr, the elder son, married and left his home for that of his bride's, Mikhailo was miserable. He nursed his jealousy in secret and as secretly hated his beautiful, jolly daughter-in-law, who had taken his son away from him. Even the birth of his grandson could not reconcile the old man to Olyona. Mikhailo seldom went to Pyotr's home and only when he had no other way of seeing his grandchild. He now lived with Semyon, the younger son, and dreaded the thought that one day some beautiful girl would take him away too.

But it was the White Tisza that took them both away.

Past the village, round a sharp bend, the brothers' raft was carried into midstream. The valley here was wide and spacious and into it the river tore out from the narrow mountain gorge as from a pipe.

"Keep to the right! She'll carry us away!" Pyotr shouted to his brother and threw his weight on the rudder.

It was difficult struggling against the current. The muscles on their arms swelled under the

strain. It was hot and stifling despite the wind and the cold that came from the water. White, frothing waves beat against the side of the raft, shaking it violently. The logs creaked and reared under their feet as though they wanted to break away from the cross-beam holding them together. However, Pyotr and Semyon, with great presence of mind, steered the raft towards a calmer stream.

When they had but a few yards to go, there was a grinding and crashing noise, and the raft, striking an underwater rock, came to an abrupt stop. Before the brothers could grasp what had happened, the raft they were towing reared up, broke the tow-line, crowded on to the head raft and, sliding headlong down the wet logs, bore down upon them, knocked them off their feet with a crushing blow in their backs and then, breaking into pieces, leapt into the water again. For a moment the boys' shirts flashed in the air and then everything vanished in the scintillating seething water.

When, a few minutes later, Mikhailo Belanyuk's raft shot out of the gorge, the old man and his mate saw traces of the catastrophe. A half-wrecked raft was revolving round a sharp rock, as though moored to it, a few wet logs had been washed up a steep bank and they stood

there almost upright, entangled in the shrubbery.

Mikhailo's whole being became petrified.

"Mate," he uttered barely audibly, "that was my Pyotr and Semyon."

He spoke these words with a timid hope that his mate would reply, "No, it's not they, Mikhailo," but he paled and almost letting the rudder out of his hands, shouted:

"Jesus! Pyotr and Semyon!"

After this old Belanyuk remembered nothing, neither his raft making fast to the shore, nor the people appearing on the bank. He sat on the ground, for some reason holding in his hands a little pebble, polished by the water and warmed by the sun, hearing voices round him but unable to grasp the meaning of what they were saying.

Search for the bodies began. They wanted to send Belanyuk home, but he refused. He took up a gaff and went along the shore with the others.

The search continued for four days. The men went all the way to Rakhovo but did not find anything. With a calm that frightened many, the old man himself directed the search, questioned those he met on his way, and it seemed to him that he was not looking for Pyotr and Semyon at all, but for some complete strangers.

Towards the evening of the fourth day Mikhailo and his friends returned home. The raftsmen, exhausted by the search, gathered in the tavern and started drinking *palinka*\* to the repose of Pyotr and Semyon's immortal souls. They drank deeply and bitterly, in silence at first, and then they began to complain of their hard life, its poverty and bleakness.

It rained that day. The tavern was dusky and damp. Fly-blown advertisements were tacked to the walls, black with tobacco smoke: firms offered their goods, steamship companies promised to take those interested to any port in the world.

"It'd be good to find a treasure," Mikhailo, a little drunk, suddenly brought out in unutterable despair, "and then to hell with everything, everything in this world!"

"A treasure—that's right," took up Mikola Subbota, Belanyuk's mate, a flabby, dreamy man who had a large family on his hands. "I'd sit in the tavern all day and spit into the river through the window. That's what I'd do!"

"That's not the way to talk about the river, Mikola," someone said reproachfully from the corner of the room. "She feeds and clothes you and me and Mikhailo...."

\* *Palinka*—a strong, home-made liquor.—*Tr.*

"Not she!" Mikhailo cried, jumping up from the bench. "My own hands feed and clothe me, my hands, my hands, my hands..." and he started pulling and tearing at his hands as though now they were a hindrance to him.

They forced Mikhailo back on to his bench and brought him another glass of *palinka*. He drank it and quietened down.

"And where can we find that treasure?" Mikola asked after a long silence.

"In the forest," Mikhailo replied. "Dovbush's\* men came to these parts to hide their treasure...."

"But will you and I find it?"

Mikhailo made no reply.

People said that after a time, when Belanyuk had got used to his sorrow, he and Mikola Subota had gone to the forest to search for the treasure, but had found nothing.

And now old Belanyuk, stooping with age, was ending his days in solitude in his cottage on the hill.

A forest ranger fell in love with Olyona, Mikhailo's daughter-in-law, when she had been a widow for a couple of years, and he took her and little Yurko to his cottage in the forest, thirty

\* Dovbush—a national hero.—*Ed.*

kilometres away. Old Mikhailo went up to see his grandson a few times, but lately he no longer had the strength to make these long trips. He did not float timber down the White Tisza any more, but when the rafts came past the village from the upper reaches twice a week, he would lock himself in his cottage and curtain his only window with his goatskin coat.

But he could not endure his loneliness to the end. He felt drawn to the river, to the people, to the sound of axes and the shouts of warning, and the old man, locking up his cottage, would walk down the hill now and then and shuffle along the shore to the place where rafts were being built and where mighty old trees came shooting down from the mountains. The lean old man with his mobile, nervous face and long, childishly fluffy hair combed straight back, wearing an embroidered goatskin vest and white, homespun woollen trousers belted with a tremendously wide, four-buckled belt, would stroll about among the raftsmen, listen to their talk and, sitting down for long rests out of their way, would watch the men at work.

To keep his body and soul together the King of the White Tisza made pipes. They sold well because Mikhailo took pains with them, ornament-

ing the long stems with carving. The money he made was enough to provide him with corn, with which he baked flat cakes and cooked broth.

\* \* \*

The Soviet Government granted old Belanyuk a pension. The first payment was brought to his cottage by a girl from the Village Soviet, who asked him to sign a receipt for it. The old man did not know how to write. He went up to the stove, poked his thumb into the soot and made a thumb-print where his signature should have been.

The girl had hardly gone when anxiety took hold of Mikhailo. Try as he would he could not understand what the money was given him for. Perhaps it was a mistake? Or could it be alms?... He propped up his front door with a pole, which meant that no one was in, and started off downhill to the Village Soviet, shuffling his feet in a senile way.

The Village Soviet was crowded and filled with tobacco smoke. The chairman himself—Stepan Gasinets, an old friend of Mikhailo's—was sitting at a table in the corner of the room, wearing a hat—dingy from wear—adorned with a little fir twig. With a perspiring and worried face Gasinets was leafing through a book of records, reading out something to a man sitting beside



him, a newcomer he must have been, because Mikhailo had never seen him in the village before. Belanyuk disliked this man on sight because he seemed severe and gloomy to him. But he took off his hat, elbowed his way through the crowd, and stopped before the table.

"*Kume*,"\* he addressed the chairman, "I received the money."

"Good," the chairman replied carelessly.

"And so I came to you to ask you what was the money given me for?"

"Good God, *kume*," the chairman retorted angrily, "can't you see I'm busy, and you come butting in with your money. It was paid to you so it must be all right."

Mikhailo felt embarrassed because he had interfered with Stepan Gasinets when he was busy and turned to go, but suddenly the newcomer spoke up.

"Wait a minute," he said, lifting his eyebrows until deep lines formed on his forehead as he turned to Gasinets, "I suppose it's the pension money?"

"What other money could he be getting?" Gasinets shrugged.

"Grandad, it's the Soviet Government who's

\* *Kume*—a customary form of address between two men of an age, either friends or kinsmen.—*Tr.*

paying you this money in your old age for having worked all your life." Saying this, the newcomer got up from his chair and revealed his unusual height.

"'Tis true I worked," Mikhailo agreed, "everyone will say so."

"And now you'll be getting this payment every month," Gasinets added cheerfully, his mood suddenly changing. "That's from the Soviet Government, *kume*, see?"

"God bless its soul," Mikhailo mumbled, although he still failed to understand just why he was due this money and every month, too! For his old age? . . . But it hadn't been like that before. However, he was already beginning to get used to the idea that everything about him was becoming different from what it used to be. Take the men working on the river or in the forest now, they worked differently too, as if they were in a hurry, as if something exceptionally good and joyful was awaiting them; and more and more rafts floated down the White Tisza with every day; and the words you heard now were never heard before: "plan," "competition," "Donbas." What these words meant was not quite clear to old Belanyuk, and he dared not ask because it wouldn't do for the former King of the White Tisza to ask the younger men, and those

of his own generation who were still alive did not know the answers themselves.

"Where do you live, Grandad?" the newcomer broke in upon the old man's thoughts.

"Here, on the hill," Belanyuk waved in the direction of his home, and suddenly caught himself up. "What d'you want to know for?"

"I want to pay you a call, may I?"

Mikhailo looked at the man. Everything about him was large: his head, crowned with a mass of fair hair, his hands, his deep-set eyes in which the old man saw his own reflection as in a mirror. The look in them was so kind and friendly, that all Mikhailo's enmity vanished without a trace.

"Sure you may," he replied, "why not?"

"Well, that's kind of you," the giant laughed and offered Mikhailo his hand.

Towards the end of the day this man—Maxim Galichenko, formerly a petty officer in the navy and now propagandist of the Regional Party Committee—did actually come to see Mikhailo Belanyuk. The cottage seemed so cramped when he walked in, you could hardly move. Galichenko put his field bag on the table, took out some bread, bacon and hard-boiled eggs, and asked the old man to share his supper with him. They ate in silence and when they were through they went out on the porch for a smoke.

"Now, Grandad, why didn't you tell me earlier that you were the King of the White Tisza himself?" Galichenko asked.

"That I *was* king," Mikhailo said with a sad smile, "now there are others. And what did my kingship bring me anyway?"

And perhaps because there was no one in the village to listen to the story of his life, which they all knew by heart already, Mikhailo told it now to Galichenko. Like all old people he remembered every detail of occurrences long past, forgetting what happened only yesterday, and his old memories were dear to him. He told his story strictly, with no embellishments or disparagement, as if the matter concerned someone else's life, and he had merely been a witness.

Galichenko listened to the old man's story thinking, meanwhile, how really poor and fettered the life of this plucky and resourceful man had been, what great joys and what scope for action he had missed, although he had a rightful claim to them. Everything: his brains, his strength and courage, everything in him was aimed towards one end—to exist. And yet what a great life was being built by just such veined, work-worn hands, which Galichenko could make out in the pale light of a match, when Mikhailo relit his pipe.

And although the old man's story resembled others, already heard by Galichenko, he was not sorry he had spent the evening with him. He believed that he now understood the most important thing: how he should talk to the White Tisza men and about what.

When they returned indoors and Mikhailo lighted a bit of candle, Galichenko said:

"Tell me, Grandad, is it possible to float larger sized rafts down your river?"

The old man flashed a glance at his guest and frowned.

"When I was young I floated a raft that was one and a half times the size of the present ones, and I drove it all the way to Rakhovo, not just over the shoals, but down a fifteen-metre fall. Some steering that!"

Still frowning, Belanyuk told how he had tried out a raft like that as a matter of interest, and then how his friends had beaten him within an inch of his life to discourage him from further experiments which threatened a reduction in the raftsmen's already miserable wages, or, what was worse still, unemployment.

"'Twas a long time ago," Mikhailo concluded, "I was foolhardy then."

They said no more after that. Galichenko bid

the old man good-bye and left, groping his way in the dark.

A few days later old Belanyuk, feeling lonely, dragged himself again to the place where timber was being floated. Paths were cleared down the length of the wooded hillside, and logs were sent from the mountain tops down these lanes. You could see the logs glide down, gathering speed on the way, disappear for a moment in the cavities at the very foot, and then leap up, flashing in the sun, to fall on the river-bank with a clamour and rumble.

Day was coming to an end, but work on the river was in full swing as far as eye could see.

Someone called Mikhailo's name. He turned round and saw Galichenko striding down the road. He was coming from the village, leaning on a knotty stick, a long roll of papers tied with string under his arm.

"Hi, there, Grandad!" he cried from a distance. "Good thing you're here too. I'm on my way to talk to the boys."

Galichenko caught up with Mikhailo and they continued the way together. The men were finishing work by the time the two reached the log cabin, where the raftsmen slept. The men, naked to the waist, were either washing themselves by the river or were already pulling clean linen

shirts over their heads. They knew Galichenko well by now and they hurried towards him, calling out greetings:

“Good evening!”

“How are you?”

The raftsmen carried their axes, saws and drills into the cabin, quickly came out again and sat down on logs or simply on the ground, forming a semicircle.

Galichenko waited until the late-comers had arrived and when everyone had settled down, he got up from his tree stump and said simply, informally, in a not very loud voice:

“I’ve come to tell you, comrades, about us—Soviet people, about our country, and what you and I are living for in this world.”

The raftsmen exchanged looks and stopped puffing at their pipes.

Galichenko paused again and suddenly, picking up his rolled up papers, unrolled one sheet with a rustle and tacked it on to the outer wall of the cabin.

“Here’s France,” he said, outlining it on the map with a bit of wood, “and here’s England—a small island in the sea, and this is our Soviet land—the land where we live and work.”

Mikhailo sat in the front row listening with one ear cupped in the palm of his hand. Galichen-



ko noticed this and raised his voice. At first he spoke of the country's wealth, her iron ore, her grain and timber, and his speech ran smoothly and calmly. Then he walked away from the map and unrolled his other sheets of paper. Photographs, carefully selected from magazines old and new, were pasted on these sheets and showed the country's construction schemes, views of towns and collective-farm fields, pictures of the country's foremost people. When Galichenko started telling the raftsmen how a magnificent dream come true had changed desert steppes into oceans of corn, backward outlying districts into cultural centres, and was raising the walls of a paper-mill beyond Rakhovo, and sending tractors out to the fields of Sub-Carpathia, he felt stirred and knew his voice was shaking and breaking, but he could not take a hold on himself. But need he speak calmly of something he himself had seen, built and then defended in the difficult years of war?

Galichenko could not tell how long his talk lasted. Evening shadows came and went, a new moon was born in the sky above the mountains, someone had already lighted a fire and its flames cast a glow over the quietly sitting men. They listened with that peculiar emotion of people who are suddenly hearing a detached description of

themselves, and they realized how glorious were the deeds they were summoned to and were capable of, how great was the ordinary, simple work they were doing on the Tisza day after day.

When Galichenko finished speaking, the raftsmen remained sitting in silence. Someone moved and heaved a sigh, but he was hissed into silence. This silence continued a minute or two until a stocky, middle-aged raftsman, tanned and black-eyed, emerged from the shadows and took up a stand by the fire. Mikhailo looked at him keenly and recognized him: it was Vasil—the son of the late Mikola Subbota.

“That you, Choli?” Vasil called, screwing up his eyes and peering into the darkness, “you here?”

“Aye,” a high voice responded from the shadows.

“D’you know what I’m going to say to you in front of everybody, Choli? You’ll no longer beat me floating raft!”

“We’ll see about that,” Choli answered, coming into the light. “Challenging me, are you?”

“I am,” Vasil replied, holding out his hand to Choli. “Not a single idle hour, not a single delay, and the raft to be one and a half times larger than before!”

Old Belanyuk started on hearing these words.

"Accepted," Choli said crisply and shook the proffered hand.

After that other men came forward and challenged their mates. An elderly tallyman squatted close to the fire and with clerkly diligence entered the names in his book: Subbota vs. Choli, Popovich vs. Glushchak, Sirota vs. Madai. They were all the sons and grandsons of good raftsmen, Mikhailo's contemporaries. Some of these friends and contemporaries of his were dead, others were ending their days in retirement, but their names went on living after them on the Tisza. These names were borne into the new life which Galichenko had spoken of, and perhaps somewhere in the Donets Basin, or even in Moscow, another spokesman like Galichenko would mention them to his people there, but Belanyuk's name would not be among them.

The old king was stricken to the heart and he himself seemed to shrink, to become small and lonely as a man stranded in the middle of a lonely road. He seemed to be cut off from life.

The names of the participants were put up on a notice-board by the Village Soviet next day, but no one read the name Belanyuk out to Mikhailo.

All day and all night Mikhailo kept to his cottage. He tried making his pipes, but they slipped

out of his fingers. Next morning he went outdoors a few times, propping up his door with a pole, but every time he came back again after taking no more than ten steps from his threshold. But at last he started on his way and covered a distance of 30 kilometres in two days, which brought him to the home of the forest ranger.

Mikhailo walked round and about the house a long time, unable to make up his mind to go in, until a youngster of seventeen or so, doing household jobs in the yard, noticed him. Chewing a bit of straw, he walked up to the old man with the light and unhurried stride of a mountaineer. His bearing, his tanned face covered with a youthful fluff, and his thin straight nose were very much like Pyotr's and only his rounded chin and somewhat full lips were like his mother's.

"Yurko, don't you know me?" the old man asked, feeling his arms go numb.

The youngster looked closely at the old man and gave a shamefaced smile.

"Grandad?"

"It's me, it's me," Mikhailo answered, happy that the boy had recognized him.

They went into the cottage. A barefooted woman was busy by the broad, squat stove. Two small children of six and nine were sitting on the floor, playing with a puppy.

Olyona saw the old man and leaned against the stove. She had not expected him to come. Old wrongs still smouldered in her heart but they were not as bitter now that they were mingled with her memories of early youth.

"Sit down, Dad," Olyona said.

Mikhailo took the seat unhurriedly, glancing now at his grandson, now at his former daughter-in-law.

Another youngster, some three years Yurko's junior, came in. He greeted the stranger and stopped in the door.

"Yours?" Mikhailo asked the woman.

"Mine." Olyona replied. "Ignat is away on duty mostly, and he and Yurko help me about the house. But what am I standing here for, you must be hungry after the journey!"

"Not a bit," Mikhailo shook his head, although he was deadly tired and everything felt parched in him.

But the woman did not heed his words. She fetched some bread and a cup of milk and placed it on the table. Mikhailo touched the cup with shaking fingers and suddenly raised his eyes to his daughter-in-law.

"Olyona, give Yurko to me!"

She took a step back. "Why, Dad, what was it you said?"

Yurko flushed and quite at a loss glanced at his mother, and then at his grandfather.

"You've got three more, Olyona, give Yurko to me!" Mikhailo repeated and burst into soundless tears, like a very, very old man.

\* \* \*

Late one evening in the middle of May, Maxim Galichenko and I were coming down from the logging camps in the mountains. We could hardly stand we were so tired, and we simply had no strength to get as far as the village centre. It was anyway too late to ask anyone to take us in for the night. Then Galichenko suggested that we spend the night at old Mikhailo Belanyuk's, whose cottage was near by.

The old man gave us a hearty welcome, but once inside the cottage he dropped his voice to a whisper as though afraid of waking someone. In the dim light of a kerosene lamp I saw a man asleep on a wide bench. His fair-haired head was thrown back a little and his bare feet protruded from under a homespun rug.

"It's all right," the old man whispered, "that's Yurko Belanyuk, my little grandson.... He's worn out making a big raft, you know what sort of a day tomorrow is! He'll be floating his first

raft tomorrow, see? Floating the first raft in his life!"

We heard both joy and anxiety in the old man's voice.

"After all Olyona did let me take him..." Mikhailo went on to say. "I taught him a year, took him along the shore as far as Rakhovo even, pointed out every shoal to him, every single stone.... What a fine raftsman he'll make!... Lie down, comrades, do.... I'll sit up, I shan't be able to sleep anyway."

Galichenko and I lay down on our host's wooden bed and instantly fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

I woke up to the touch of a hand and opened my eyes. Bluish dawn, peculiar to the mountains, had broken and in the half-light of the room I made out Mikhailo's form bending over me.

"Perhaps you'd like to come to the river with us too?" The *gatyar*\* has opened the sluices already. Hear the noise?"

I was aware that it was not a suggestion but a request on the part of our host that we, too, should witness his grandson floating his first raft.

We were dying for sleep but we got up, dressed and left the cottage. Yurko, wearing a new

\* *Gatyar*—the sluice-keeper in the mountains.—*Ed.*

Hutsul goatskin coat, was already waiting for us by the gate, holding an axe on his shoulder with a small linen food bag hung on it. On seeing us Yurko took off his hat, with a young cock's feather stuck under the band, and walked towards us.

"Good morning, comrades!"

His manner was composed and dignified, and his walk light and soundless.

"Well, Yurko," Galichenko asked him, "did Vasil Subbota take up your challenge?"

Yurko replied shyly: "At first Vasil flared up at me—how did I, a young chap, dare challenge him—but then he thought it over and put his name down opposite mine."

"It will be a hard job competing with Subbota!"

"I know. But Grandad says it's better that it's hard."

"It's all right, it's all right, son," the old man nodded encouragingly.

The path was steep. The sky above the mountains was like an inverted bowl. Towards the west, paling stars still glimmered against the dark, greenish hues of the sky. Two elongated, feathery little clouds floated along its light eastern part. They looked grey at first, but then they began to turn yellow and suddenly filled out with gold. The thick forest on the crest of the moun-



tains grew transparent and it seemed from a distance that you could count the trees.

By the time we reached our destination, the tops of the mountains were already flooded with the sun, but down below it was still damp and gloomy. The White Tisza swelled with the water released by the *gatyars* from the reservoirs in the mountains. Heavy rafts, like living creatures, were impatiently rocking on the waves. The raftsmen's white shirts and hats flickered here and there. Final preparations were under way.

Old Mikhailo stood leaning on his stick with both hands. His eyes were closed and it was difficult to tell whether he was listening to the river's menacing roar, or was waiting for some other sound.

"Well, I must be off, Grandad," Yurko said. He stood waiting for some words in parting, but the old man remained mute and did not open his eyes; like a blind man he groped for Yurko's hand, found it and pressed it in his own.

"Farewell to you!" the youngster said to us.

"Good luck!"

Yurko went down to the water's edge, stopped a moment, then leapt smartly on to the raft where his mate was waiting for him by the long oars.

Suddenly a shout, drawn out and shrill, swept across the river. Axe blows fell. Old Mikhailo

opened his eyes with a start. Some men swiftly knocked out the cross-bar holding the raft. The raft shuddered and started gliding downstream. Then the men raised their long oars in studied rifle drill manner and, running along the slippery logs to the bow, flung them sharply forward into the water. There was a great splash. The raft righted itself and glided into the middle of the river.

Old Belanyuk watched the disappearing raft for a few moments and like all those remaining ashore waved after it. Suddenly, throwing his stick away, he started running after the raft past the people standing along the shore, stumbling over sharp stones and shouting:

“Men, I’m off! . . . D’you hear, I’m off! . . .”

His wrinkled face was alight with rapture and senile cunning. Running was difficult, but he kept on and on, with all his remaining strength. His eyes were swimming and the old man fancied that it was not Yurko, no, not Yurko, but Mikhailo himself who was standing on that swift raft—and the White Tisza was carrying him towards the distant valley bathed in the light of early morning.



### A GOOD MATCH

**M**ikhailo Smuzhenitsa, the local carpenter, is sitting on a log in front of the Snegovets Hotel.

He is a neat, white-haired little man of sixty or so. He has cut his small face, the size of a fist, while shaving, and the cuts are carefully plastered with strips of cigarette paper.

The day being Sunday, Smuzhenitsa is wearing his old-fashioned suit with "stove-pipe" trousers and a short coat, roundly cut away in front. Once upon a time the suit was black but with the years it has acquired a greenish tinge.

Smuzhenitsa has been sitting thus for over an hour. He came here straight from church and is evidently waiting for someone.

It's the end of June. The day is fair. It's hot and stuffy in the Sub-Carpathian plain now, while here in Snegovets, with mountains all round, it's merely warm. The air is transparent after last night's rain and everything in the far distance seems only a stone's throw away.

The mountain pasture with all its folds is clearly visible from the hotel yard. You can see the gay little white barrier posts, guarding the winding road up the pass. The road itself and the mountain paths are a motley of coloured kerchiefs, skirts and aprons of the women on their way to Snegovets from their villages in the mountains.

But the delights of a fair day are lost on Smuzhenitsa. He is at odds with the world and misery gnaws at his heart.

Smuzhenitsa is firmly convinced that until now he has never made a mistake in any of his actions. He is a practical, circumspect man, he'll

measure a hundred times and only cut once, and even then he'll take a deep breath before doing it. Everyone knows that God helps those who help themselves.

When Mikhailo was a young man this same God had sent him Vasily Strizhak, proprietor of a carpenter's shop, for a teacher, and he took Mikhailo on as an apprentice.

Strizhak could have been making wardrobes or beds or any other things, but he made nothing except coffins, crosses and graveyard fences.

Mikhailo had nothing against a trade such as this, but there was a girl he wanted to marry and she had an aversion to coffins, crosses, and graveyard fences. She refused Smuzhenitsa.

"Don't you mind!" the master said to his disheartened assistant. "Why, wardrobes and beds they're passed down from father to son, one can't always afford to buy new ones. But a coffin and cross, now, that's something everyone needs, even if it's only once in a lifetime.... As for the lass, don't let it worry you, we'll find you another."

And now Smuzhenitsa cannot even recall the name of that girl.

He married Gafia, Strizhak's daughter. When the old man died Mikhailo became the owner of the shop.

You can see for yourselves he made no mistake there.

Smuzhenitsa worked alone, without any assistants. He was not striving for wealth, but not because he did not want it, he simply could not manage it. And here again he made no mistake. Shandor Beila, the timber merchant, for instance, built himself a two-storey house in Snegovets. He thought he was doing it for himself but it happened to be for the District Committee. And as for Smuzhenitsa's little house, it went on being Smuzhenitsa's.

He did not even have a sign over his shop. He was not as greedy for renown as his neighbour Stepan Lyubka, the tailor. All Lyubka did was change the signs: he had one in German when the Austro-Hungarians were there, then one in Czech, and then he had to replace that one, too, for one in Hungarian. And now that Soviet power has come Lyubka put up a completely new sign. Smuzhenitsa had it all worked out and knew how much these signs had cost the tailor.

When Smuzhenitsa was forty his wife gave birth to a daughter. The doctor told him that Gafia could never bear another child.

Mikhailo was taken aback: but who would knock up the crosses and coffins in his shop after

he died? Who would carry on after him? It was a son he needed, not a daughter....

He did not grieve long, however, and got over his disappointment. He went into his shop, selected some well-dried boards and set to making a cradle like the one he had once seen at the notary's.

Smuzhenitsa sweated over this unusual piece of furniture. He worked on it for several days, making the cradle with an allowance for growth, so that it would last the little girl till she was ten at least.

When the cradle was ready he placed it in the middle of his shop, stepped back to look at it, and seemed to take fright. It was the only thing he had ever made for the living. The cradle itself seemed to be alive and gay among the stacked up crosses and sections of coffins, like a green blade of grass among dead stones.

A sadness he did not understand crept into the carpenter's heart, writhed there awhile and then dissolved.

They named the child Anna. She grew up into a brown-eyed girl with delicate features, slightly cowed by the sins and inhibitions with which life was rife, she was told. She was taught to fear God and obey her parents implicitly.

But God was busy and so Anna was instructed in his name by the pastor and her father and mother.

Gafia—taciturn and mountainous—took her daughter to church. There they would stand for a long time before a black boarding covered with terrifying drawings, that took up half the wall. This was a catalogue of tortures in hell awaiting one for sins committed in this world. The girl's heart cringed in terror. And yet she sinned.... She was a sinner because, while standing in church, her thoughts were often not of God but of the meadow ... green and covered with goose down, stretching along the bank of the little river on the outskirts of Snegovets. They tended geese there. Little girls would meet in the meadow; sitting down in a circle, they would sing in thin faulty voices, rocking their rag dolls to sleep. It was a sinful life but not a frightening one.

The carpenter was glad that Anna was growing up a meek, obedient girl. He pictured to himself the time when Anna would be grown up and he would have to give her away in marriage. And he would only give her away to a reliable, well-to-do man. However, it seemed such a long time away that it was too early to think about it.

But one morning Gafia, who had been the first to rise, called her husband and said:



"Mikhailo, come here. Look how Anna is sleeping."

Mikhailo climbed out of his feather bed and shuffled in his bare feet to the cradle which now stood on props so that it should not rock.

Anna was sleeping stretched out full length and her little feet stuck out beyond the bed posts.

"It's short," said Smuzhenitsa and glanced at his wife.

It only struck him now that his daughter was already twelve years old and that in another five she would be ready for marriage.

They carried the cradle out to a remote corner of the shop. Anna was given the tall bed with the feather mattresses, on which the late Vasily Strizhak had once slept, and the parents now moved to the little room next to the kitchen to sleep on trestle beds.

Whenever they met their friends now, Smuzhenitsa and his wife liked to say in passing:

"Yes . . . we're aging . . . our daughter's a grown-up lass now. . . ."

They caught themselves taking measure of eligible men for their daughter to marry. This game they usually indulged in on Sundays when Anna went out walking with her girl friends and the old people stayed at home alone.

They would carry a couple of chairs out to the

front gate and sit down, as though they were posing for a photograph, to watch what was going on in the street. This Sunday amusement was not the carpenter's own idea, it was an old custom in Snegovets.

In previous years the Smuzhenitsas could sit for hours by the gate without uttering a single word. But now things were different. They would imagine that Anna's future husband was either the notary, or the bank clerk, or the dairy owner. Of course they knocked some fifteen years off the men's ages. And as for Anna, she was already grown up in their imagination.

"... As long as they love one another..." Gafia would sigh.

"Foolish woman," Mikhailo snapped, "and how did you feel when you married me?"

\* \* \*

Storms raged over the Carpathians. Century old beeches and sycamores buffeted each other, crashed, split and collapsed, torn out by the roots. Lyubka, the tailor, kept changing the signs over his shop while Smuzhenitsa, like a stunted, tenacious juniper shrub, simply pressed himself closer to the ground and remained untouched by the storm.

The final blast of wind felled many of those whom Smuzhenitsa once fancied eligible for Anna. For one of them—the former notary who died of heart failure—Smuzhenitsa had to make a coffin.

But no matter what the changes they did not worry the carpenter unduly: his clients and Anna remained his only worries as before.

Smuzhenitsa, a close-fisted man, who kept a tight hold on every penny, begrudged his daughter nothing. In that part of Snegovets no girl was as well dressed as Anna. On weekdays she went about decked out like a bride. It embarrassed her at first but gradually she got used to it and began to think that this was as it should be.

She was not encouraged to do any work at all in order not to spoil her hands and keep them as clean and white as a landlord's daughter's. Anna languished in her idleness and her youthful soul was gradually becoming bloated with laziness. The only thing she ever read besides her prayer-book was Bobulsky's *Book of Dreams*. She read the interpretation of dreams and told her own fortune by casting bread balls on the magic circles given in the book.

At seventeen Anna's fancy was caught by a Siberian sergeant, Novodymov by name. The frontier post where he served was near Snegovets.

The sergeant used to walk to Snegovets every Sunday to drink a glass of beer and take a walk with the girls. He was a short, sturdy fellow with a frank face and a clear, straight look, and was a past master, it seemed, at making friends with the girls. But for some reason he was shy with Anna, while she became quite flustered and did not know how to answer his questions. She obviously liked the sergeant, and her girl friends lost no time in whispering the news all over the street.

This whispered rumour reached Smuzhenitsa as well and caused him no little anxiety. It is quite possible that Mikhailo would have liked the sergeant too, but he had his own conception of what Anna needed.

"Put him out of your head," he shouted at his daughter. "What has he got to offer you? Neither money nor position.... He's got ten years to go yet before he'll stand on his own feet...."

Yes, Smuzhenitsa had his own idea about the sort of man Anna should marry. Of course it's true that the men he had considered eligible before had been swept away by the storm. The very thought that Anna might have been born some ten years earlier threw him into a sweat.... God forbid! And on this occasion, too, God had saved him from error. These men were not the only fish

in the sea. Nowadays, too, there were other men worth their salt, who lived in comfort and did not forsake their own interests.

Anna wept when she heard her father's stern verdict but she dared not disobey. Submissiveness was more deeply drilled into her than a nail hammered into an oaken board.

Sergeant Novodymov did not see Anna on two successive Sundays and on the third he set out to find the carpenter's house.

Smuzhenitsa spoke to the sergeant politely, but informed him that Anna was already engaged to be married and it was quite out of the question for an engaged girl to meet another man.

"I understand," the disheartened sergeant kept repeating, "I understand."

He walked away with drooping head and Smuzhenitsa even felt sorry for him.

"He's not bad, is he," he thought, looking after Novodymov. "Look what a man fell in love with her!"

But he at once got angry with himself for this pity of his: "Damn them, this way I'll be losing Anna before I know it!" Then Smuzhenitsa made up his mind to make the lie he told the sergeant come true as soon as possible.

Gafia called on the old matchmaker, then took a trip to Nizhneye to see her relatives, and placed

her order with everyone for a reliable, prospective husband.

A week went by and the prospective husbands began coming up before him. But Smuzhenitsa rejected them all without mercy. One was too old ("will you have Anna casting her eye at strangers?"); another had a doubtful past ("why should Anna put her head in somebody else's noose?"); a third acted as if he were bestowing a great favour on Smuzhenitsa by taking his daughter in marriage ("Anna herself is in a position to bestow great favours"). There was even a chairman of a collective farm among them, but he drank. ("Men like that can't hold their positions long nowadays.")

Matters were not going well. Smuzhenitsa felt depressed. Every now and again he recalled the picture of the sergeant, walking away with drooping head, but he only got terribly angry with himself for thinking about it.

Towards evening one day there was a knock on his door and Fyodor Taninets, his kinsman from the Verkhneye village, came in. Taninets was working in some office as a buyer of shingles, or perhaps it was bolts, but the way he acted one might have thought that he alone was keeping the universe from toppling and, listening to him, you began to believe that if it was not for

his shingles and bolts, humanity would be in danger of going wild.

"Hey, *kume*! You've guests for the night!" Taninets shouted as though Smuzhenitsa were deaf. "I've come to attend a particularly important conference at the office, and there's no room at the hotel. But I'm not alone, *kume*, there's a good friend of mine with me, a salesman from the store at Verkhneye. Come in, Comrade Gichka!"

And without waiting for his host's invitation, Taninets pushed in a long-legged, narrow-shouldered man of about thirty, with an elongated, bony face. The man had a charming smile and the thought instantly crossed Smuzhenitsa's mind: "Look at the smartie! A smile is a great thing for trade! You can twist any one you like round your little finger under cover of a smile!"

Smuzhenitsa then took a close look at the man and noted that he was not dressed for travel. His suit was not pure wool, but it was well pressed. And his shirt was as fresh as though he had only just changed it before coming in.

"Oh-ho!" the carpenter thought to himself, "I wonder if he's brought the man because of Anna?"

But Taninets said nothing and Smuzhenitsa asked no questions. He just gave Gafia a whis-

pered order to send Anna in to meet the guests a little later.

"I don't remember seeing you in Verkhneye before," Smuzhenitsa said to Gichka when the guests were seated.

"I haven't been there long," Gichka replied. "It's not been a year yet.

"Come from far?"

"No, from Svalyava."

"Prefer Verkhneye to Svalyava, do you?"

"Circumstances," Gichka said evasively.

"His wife died," Taninets cut in.

"That's true," Gichka said. "It was hard remaining at the old place."

Smuzhenitsa nodded in sympathy, but to himself he thought: "Fibbing, I suppose. If all the widowers in the world took to moving, what would the result be? He was in charge of a store, the time has come and he's taken a move on."

There was no criticism in the carpenter's thought. He appreciated resourcefulness in people, although he himself lacked the quality.

"So you're an orphan, are you?" Smuzhenitsa said after a pause.

"No, he's a widower," Taninets broke in again.

"He's certainly out for marriage," Smuzhenitsa decided.



He liked Gichka. "You can see he's no fool and knows what he's about," he thought. "Of course he's not very handsome. But then he'll appreciate Anna more, and his job is a profitable one. And then take him, Smuzhenitsa, didn't he marry Gafia? She was so far from being a beauty that at first he dreaded looking at her, but then he got used to her eventually and it seemed all right now."

Anna came in, said good evening to the guests and with an unconcerned air settled down by the window. Gichka seemed to lose the power of speech in the girl's presence, and his shyness made him even more awkward.

"Man, is that how it is?" Smuzhenitsa mused, watching Gichka. "You're eloquent and smart in business, I dare say, but here. . . . You'll be dancing to Anna's tune yet. . . ."

Now and then Gichka shot furtive looks at Anna, but she never flicked an eye in his direction. She sat by the window, lazily breaking off some dry leaves from the plants which stood on the window-sill.

From the window she could see the mountains covered with rain-washed waste ground. Anna remembered that three years ago, while she was still at school, the pupils, together with all the Snegovetsians, went to this waste ground to

plant apple-trees. And now the ten thousand apple-trees they had transplanted were blossoming for the first time and their sweet fragrance floated into the room on this May evening.

Gichka was put up for the night in the cubby-hole behind the kitchen. Gafia shared Anna's bed, while Smuzhenitsa and Taninets had beds made for them on work benches in the shop.

They got ready for bed by the light of Taninets's pocket torch. A faint beam fell into a dark corner of the shop and Taninets saw the cradle.

"What's that you've got there?"

"It's a cradle."

"Leaving off your old trade?"

"Oh no. It was Anna's. Want to buy it?"

"Why are you selling it? Now Anna will be getting married, she'll need it."

"But who is there for her to marry?" Smuzhenitsa pretended he did not understand.

"What do you mean? Why, Gichka! What's wrong with him?"

"But I didn't say there was anything wrong with him."

"You won't be making a mistake," Taninets grunted, settling down on the work bench. "I haven't counted his money, of course, but the man Gichka relieved at Verkhneye went away with a regular mountain of luggage."

"But perhaps this Gichka of yours has no thought of marriage?" Smuzhenitsa asked.

"Bah, man! I'm speaking to you quite formally and all you can say is 'perhaps'!"

After a while Taninets began to snore and his snores must have been heard on the other side of Verkhovina.

Although Smuzhenitsa trusted Taninets he nevertheless questioned at least ten men from Verkhovina about Gichka before he could make up his mind.

"Yes, that's true," they said, "he's a quiet, good man. And he's a good salesman.... He'll get you anything you want. And as for the man he relieved making a pile, that's true too."

After that Gichka sent in his middlemen. Anna wept from morning till night and threatened to lay hands on herself. Sergeant Novodymov had evidently taken a strong hold of her heart. And then there was the wedding....

\* \* \*

... And now here is Smuzhenitsa sitting on a log in front of the hotel on this fair day in June, heaping curses on Taninets for bringing Gichka into the house, cursing himself for succumbing to the temptation, and Anna for having

stopped weeping too soon and finally giving way to her parents' will.

A number of women in groups and singly are walking along the yard towards the hotel. They are the district milkmaids. They have come to Snegovets to attend a conference. Flowered skirts, aprons and jackets flicker before Smuzhenitsa's eyes.

Smuzhenitsa is alert. Screwing up his eyes he peers at each group. Suddenly he sees the one he is waiting for.

She is walking along with her friends, going round the piles of brick and sand heaped up in the yard. There's a rolled up exercise book in her hand. She has filled out a little and has an eager look about her. A strand of hair has escaped from under her kerchief. She blows at it, straightens her kerchief, but the little strand stubbornly escapes again.

"Daughter!" Smuzhenitsa calls and gets up from the log.

Anna pauses, falls back from her friends and walks up to the old man.

"Good day, Father," she brings out, suppressing a sigh. "You here again?"

"What else can I do? You're not a stranger to me, you know." Smuzhenitsa's voice drops to a whisper: "Leave him, leave him...."

"Whatever for?" Anna shrugs, "I've already told you, Father, that I'm happy with him."

"Happy?" Smuzhenitsa says with a mirthless smile. "What's there to be happy about? Other men who are in trade are making money and this one hasn't a cent to his name. The wives of the others are living a life of leisure, and this one's sent his wife out to the farm, to milk cows...."

"I went myself!"

"Small wonder since your husband can't make ends meet."

"We'll make them meet, together," Anna replies.

She feels sorry for her father, but at the same time she resents his grumbling, his refusal to understand that what he is saying is an insult to her. Anna listens to her father, biting her lips, keeping a tight hold on herself not to make a rude retort to the old man. But Smuzhenitsa grows more and more incensed.

"He's come between us, Anna! Here you've come to Snegovets to the hotel, and not to your own home, to your father and mother. Was it he, your Fyodor, who has forbidden you to?"

"No," Anna says, "it's I. I don't want to listen to you abusing my husband."

"And what would you have us do—pray to him? I'm telling you for the last time, Anna.

Leave him! And if there's a child, we'll take care of it too.... How has this Fyodor of yours bewitched you so?"

"I find life with him interesting."

"Interesting?" Smuzhenitsa asks and looks puzzled. Until now he's known that life could be comfortable, prosperous, but—interesting?

"And what sort of a life is that, eh?"

Anna heaves a sigh.

"You're behind the times, Father! You always prided yourself on having made no mistakes in your life. But, Father, perhaps the only time you did *not* make a mistake was when you arranged this marriage for me!"

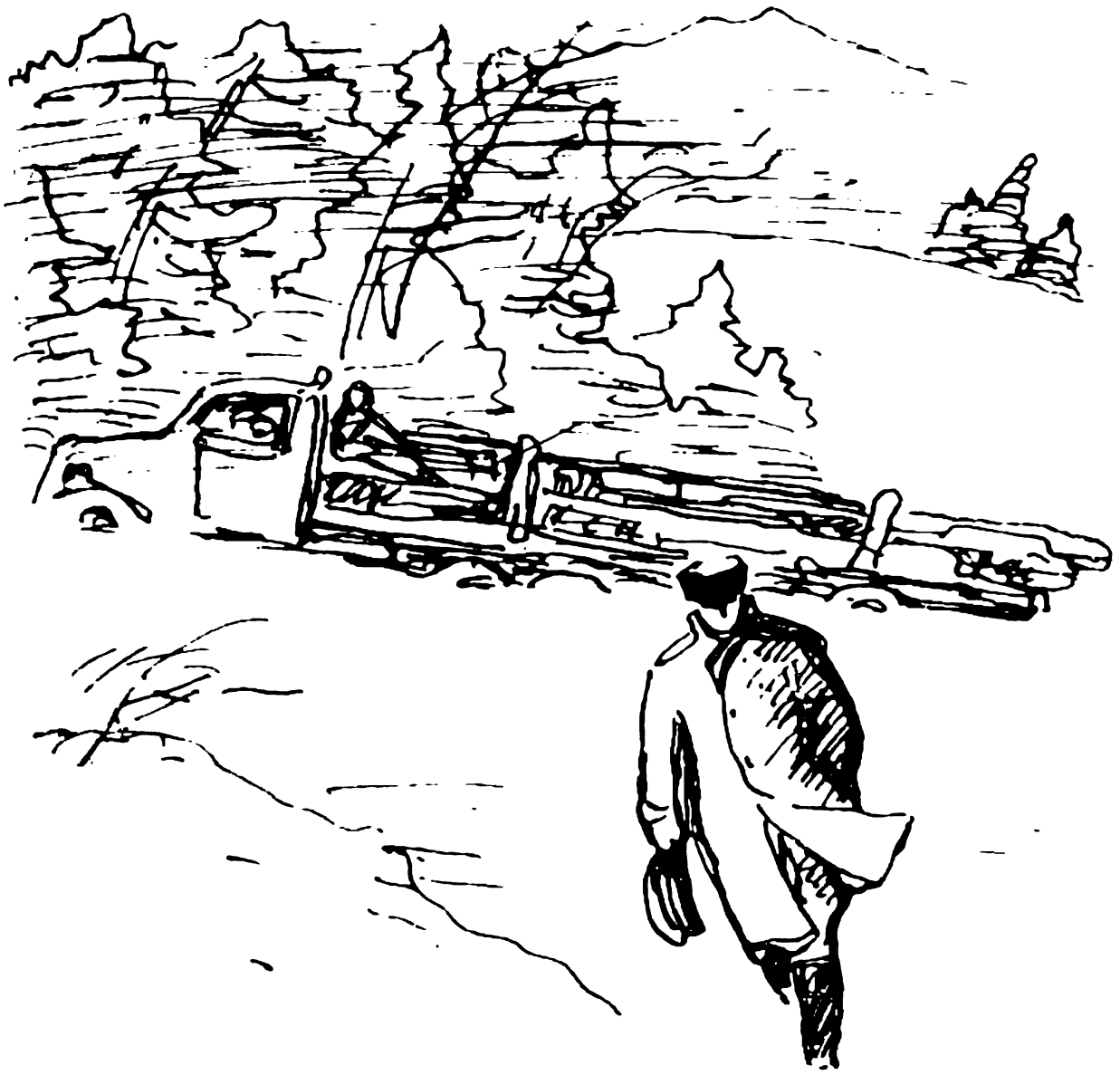
... The farm's lorries are parked in front of the hotel to take the milkmaids back at the end of the day. Smuzhenitsa watches Anna get into the cabin next to the driver. "She's already finding it difficult to climb into the lorry ... it must be soon now," he is thinking, "and I was about to sell the cradle!"

The lorries start off at last and everything is lost to view in a thick cloud of dust.

When the dust has settled, he again sees the lorry, which is taking Anna away, but on the opposite bank of the river now. It's crawling slowly along the winding road. Now it disappears round a bend only to reappear a few yards

higher up, and so it goes on, all the way to the pass.

But Smuzhenitsa still sits on his log. He is sick at heart. Perhaps he'd feel better if he went and told his sorrows to someone. But suddenly it dawns on him that there is no one to whom he can tell this particular sorrow of his, that nobody will sympathize with him or be sorry that Fyodor Gichka, his son-in-law, has turned out to be an honest man.



### A MATTER OF DUTY

Someone had arrived at the hotel late at night and was now moving about the room in the dark, getting ready for sleep on the vacant bed next to mine.

Half-awake, I heard the new arrival trying to hang his stiffly frozen mackintosh closer to the



stove, thrust his brief-case—or perhaps it was a field-bag—under his pillow, and, sitting down on the bed, start pulling off his heavy boots.

His mackintosh and boots had a smell of frost about them. They seemed to be saturated with it, the way a man and his clothes are sometimes saturated with the smell of tobacco.

I was soon fully awake and remembered vexedly that a fierce January snow-storm has been raging for three days now, and that you could neither walk nor drive to the villages in the mountains.

My neighbour settled down to sleep. The bed sagged under his weight with a mournful twang.

Then everything grew still. I lay sleepless, listening to the howling of the storm, which had brought in my new room-mate in the middle of the night, a man who had come apparently on duty.

And I set to thinking of the enduring strength in the little word “duty.” How this word, disregarding one’s wishes or time, roused one to action, giving fortitude to the weak and stubbornness to the complaisant. An order is given—and men start walking or driving heaven knows where, at times surmounting difficulties which they would never have surmounted were they on the trip of their own free will.

On this thought I fell asleep.

When I awoke again it was already day and there was no one in the room except the new arrival and me.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, sipping hot tea out of a mug—a stout major of the militia, with a clean-shaven head and reddish eyebrows.

Our eyes met. We smiled at each other, both of us feeling a certain shyness. Though we had long since known each other by sight we had never met.

“It’s a small world!” the major said and offered me his plump, freckled hand. “My name’s Stepanyuk, Ivan Romanovich.”

Stepanyuk gave the impression of one of those men who attain their position and rank neither through brilliance nor a stroke of luck, but through years of persevering work. Such men do their duty faithfully, pedantically and not without wisdom, but no one would ever suspect them of having any subtlety of feeling.

“Going to stay here long?” I asked.

“No, I’m passing through,” Stepanyuk replied. “I’ve already been in this district a week, but there’s another village I’ve got to go to.”

The village he mentioned lay in the same direction as the place I was bound for, but the storm had held me up.

"It's different in your case," Stepanyuk said when I told him I was afraid we would have to remain in Snegovets for a long time. "Your case is different. Your time is your own, while I have just two days. I'll try to get there today."

"How?"

"Timber-carriers will be going there. I made my arrangements with them last night."

"Then I'll go with you too!"

"Why not?" the major agreed. "Company makes even the frost warmer."

He finished his tea and left shortly afterwards to see about the transport.

The major came back by the time I had finished dressing and shaving. A column of timber-carriers was to start off in two hours' time and the drivers had promised to give us a signal outside the hotel.

The major and I decided to stay in the dormitory, shuddering at the memory of the Snegovets tea-room.

"Yes, it's certainly not very attractive," said the major, "and yet it doesn't need much to improve it."

"The merest trifle," I replied, "a more considerate approach...."

The major's face darkened. His reddish eyebrows quivered and slowly drew together.

"We've got to get rid of formalism," he said. "It sticks, damn it, and it leads sometimes to man getting the last place, although we know—'How proud sounds the name of *man*!' "

Conversation seemed to lag after that. Every now and again we exchanged a few words on odd subjects, but in a dull and spiritless way. It seemed to me that Stepanyuk's mind was on something else and that he was thinking of it all the time, that perhaps he would have liked to tell me about it but was holding himself in check.

And suddenly, just as I had made up my mind to leave him in peace, and was about to pick up an old magazine I had leafed through a hundred times, Stepanyuk stopped me with a gesture.

"Listen," he said, "to a story I got mixed up in. Maybe things like it happened before and I simply didn't notice it? However, I'll tell you about it."

"Well then, before my appointment to the regional office I used to work in the district near Snegovets, also in the Militia and in the Criminal Investigation Department too. My job is hardly a pleasant one, you sometimes come in

touch with the seamy side of life, or have to handle such filth and baseness that, believe it or not, you come home and wash and wash as though some of the filth had stuck to you.

“Well, there was I working in the district and one day I came across a case of theft.

“It all started with the disappearance of two sacks of grain at one of the collective farms. And then, suddenly, a wave of thefts swept over those parts like a plague. The same man was responsible for all the robberies; he was bold, I may even say desperate, but elusive. We could tell by the “handwriting” of the thief that he was inexperienced, an amateur as it were, and yet we could not get on his tracks. However, it came to our men’s notice that the farm blacksmith, a young Gypsy, had lately been living beyond his means: drinking and throwing money about. But it should be said at this point that this blacksmith was simply a wonderful worker, honest and cheerful, and as for mechanics, he was a jack of all trades.

“He joined the farm in the very first days of collectivization in Verkhovina. Until then he lived in “Paris”—that’s the nickname given to a Gypsy settlement outside the village Nizhneye. Ten little clay hovels—that’s the whole of “Paris” for you! How did the Gypsy live? In the

summer he mixed clay with straw for building material, and in the other seasons he worked as a tinker.

“The chap came to the farm and said: ‘Give me some work, I’m fed up with the old life.’ ‘And what can you do?’ ‘I’ll learn anything,’ he answered. And he really had a gift for everything. He caught on to the meaning of things as quickly as a dry tree catches on fire: before you can bat an eyelid it’s all aflame with a clear strong blaze. Well, and he was greedy for work too, they say. He’d be welding an ordinary axle, that’s all, and yet he’d have the whole smithy rocking with excitement.

“And this young blacksmith was the one they suspected. It wasn’t even suspicion, but—how shall I put it more clearly?—well, you know how it is in the pastures: the day is fine, never a cloud or a breath of wind, and yet an old shepherd scents bad weather coming.

“I did hear talk about this blacksmith, but I never happened to see him. So I decided to make his acquaintance.

“He came to Snegovets when he was summoned. When he walked into my room I looked up at him and words stuck in my throat.... I gaped, I was speechless. I shall not be exaggerating if I say that never have I seen a man so

handsome, and yet in Verkhovina, you know, beauty is no rarity. But in this case it must have been Mother Nature saying: 'Here, look and marvel at what I can create! Not bad, eh?'

"And there was the blacksmith standing in front of me, tall and straight, his jacket slung over one shoulder. His skin was dark, but the shade was golden rather than black, and his brown eyes glimmered as if sparks from the forge had flown into them and had not gone out but instead had settled in his eyes, kept alive by some inner sort of breeze.

"I wished so keenly that this man should not be the thief, I can't even explain it to you. At last I pulled myself together and asked him:

" 'Do you know about the theft at the Medvyanitsky store?'

" 'I do,' he replied calmly.

" 'And at the October Farm?'

" 'I do.'

"I enumerated all the thefts to him and to all my questions he replied: 'I do.'

" 'And who do you think,' I said and looked away in order not to see the man, 'could be doing all this?'

" 'I,' he said, and I felt as though someone had lashed me with a whip.

"I thought perhaps I hadn't heard right, or

had not understood his meaning, or that he had said it for the sake of mischief. But no, I looked at him and saw that it was true. And he was as calm as ever, even, I should say, indifferent. I don't know why but I found myself asking him:

“ ‘And the two sacks of grain from your farm?’ ”

“Suddenly the man winced as though I had touched him on the raw. Anger welled up in his eyes.

“ ‘No!’ he shouted and his breathing quickened, ‘I did not, I did not take those sacks, damn them to hell!’ ”

The major stopped and gave his shaved head a hard rub.

“That was that,” he said slowly after a pause. “Now you see how things turned out. Those two sacks had simply vanished, as though they had been washed away.”

“The farm committee held a meeting and racked their brains: who could have taken them? The chairman was blacker than night; the Party secretary was at a loss. ‘There isn't even anyone we *could* suspect,’ he says. But at this point one of the foremen up and says: ‘Who else can we suspect except this dirty Gypsy we've got at our farm now?’ ”

“No one supported the man but neither did anyone (and that's the most important part)



give him a setback. And yet everyone knew the blacksmith for an honest, splendid worker.... That's how it is sometimes....

"When the blacksmith heard of this the injustice of it made him see red. The man was hot-tempered. 'So you think I'm a thief, do you, then here's some more!' and he went wild. One thing led to another; theft followed theft.

"When I had heard the blacksmith out I felt such anger at him, such exasperation, that I could not keep back my words:

"'You so and so,' I said to him, 'you damned so and so. You deserve no mercy. If I had my way I'd not prosecute you for thieving but for trampling your self-respect into the mud. And you'd get no mercy from me. Whose game are you playing? That fool of a foreman's? Think you're so generous, flinging your honour about? And was it yours alone? Your people are struggling for a new life; it's no easy job, and you are tripping them up.... The man called you a dirty Gypsy, but do you know what Pushkin, Gorky and Tolstoi wrote about Gypsies? Do you know how they appreciated Gypsies as a gifted, freedom-loving and dignified people? Oh no, don't look to me for pity....'

"And really pity was out of the question in this case. The man had to be saved. Thieving is like

drink or gambling—it gets into you, becomes a drug, a habit, and to break yourself of a habit is no easy job, I can tell you. . . .

“The case was heard shortly afterwards. I went along. The man answered all the judges’ questions with reluctance, and as for his final word, he refused it altogether. He threw hostile looks at me as though I were to blame for everything.

“All this happened a little less than six years ago. I moved to Uzhgorod from that district and, to be quite honest, had begun to forget this business. And, suddenly, just think of it, last week as I was sitting over some official papers in my office, I heard someone knocking. ‘Come in,’ I called out. The door opened and in walked my old friend the blacksmith.

“ ‘Know me, Comrade Major?’

“ ‘I should say I do,’ I answered, ‘so you’re back?’

“ ‘Yes, finished my stretch.’

“ ‘What can I do for you?’ I asked.

“He flashed a queer sort of look at me and seemed at a loss.

“ ‘Nothing, Comrade Major, I was just . . . I was walking past. . . . I’m sorry I disturbed you.’

“ ‘It’s all right, it’s all right,’ I said.

“That was all. He went away. I resumed my work. And there was I writing and reading but I felt anxiety gnawing at me, and my mind kept returning to the blacksmith. ‘Now why did he come?’ I was thinking. ‘He went to the trouble of finding me, so he must have had a reason, was eager to see me. Perhaps he needed help? I did ask him if there was anything I could do for him, and he said nothing. But then, he must have come for some reason or other.’ And suddenly I felt rotten, ashamed somehow, you know the way you feel when you’re walking along, lost in thought, and someone greets you and you fail to acknowledge the greeting. It strikes you afterwards but too late.... ‘What can I do for you?’... But it wasn’t help, or protection of favours he wanted from me, he did not want anything at all from me. He simply came to see me, and sometimes it means the world to a man to ‘simply’ go and see someone. And I, I gave him an icy welcome, a blow on the head....

“I went out into the corridor but the blacksmith had gone. I rushed into the street, but he was nowhere to be seen. Well, what was I to do? I made up my mind then that I would look for him and be sure to find him. A generous impulse should be reciprocated in kind.”

Stepanyuk was about to add something to his story, but at that moment the long muffled sound of a driver's signal carried up into the room.

"That's for us," the major sprang up, "get dressed."

... For over an hour three timber-carriers, their engines roaring furiously, crawled up the snow-swept mountain road. I tried to guess how far we had gone from Snegovets, but it was impossible. The wind whistled and whipped up clouds of snow dust, biting and impenetrable.

There was no room for us in the cab. The major and I sat on the open platform, frozen stiff from the fiendish cold.

"Still alive?" Stepanyuk asked me from time to time.

"So far," I muttered and inwardly kept cursing myself. "What the hell made me join the major? He's on duty, but why did I have to go? Might as well have stayed in Snegovets!"

Time dragged on, there was no end to it. I tried to think of this and that, but even thoughts froze up in the cold. The corner I had occupied at the Snegovets hotel seemed like paradise to me.

"Still alive?"

"Think so."

We crossed the bridge at last. A tall crucifix with a rusted tin figure of Christ on it flashed past on the very edge of the road to our right. And then something that was either a haystack covered with snow or a house floated by.

"Hey," the major shouted abruptly, "I think I'm there!"

He got up, looked about him and started hammering on the roof of the driver's cab.

"What's the matter?" asked the driver, sticking his head out.

"Stop here," the major said and turned to me. "Well, good-bye. I'll go and look for that blacksmith. They say he's working on the farm here."

The lorry stopped. Stepanyuk jumped down heavily and waved his field bag in farewell.

And although I continued the journey in solitude, on the same open platform, believe me, the cold did not seem so biting any longer.



## THE BROOK

**T**he thunderstorm overlook us on the outskirts of Snegovets.

It grew dark. The mountains in the distance disappeared behind a curtain of rain. A violent whirl of dust swept along the road, picking up

scraps of paper and wisps of hay, left lying about by someone. The first drops fell on the road and within a second it looked speckled.

We dashed to the nearest cottage to seek shelter from the approaching downpour. This log house, with a steep ancient roof completely overgrown with green moss, stood below the level of the road. A few steps, dug out in the ground and edged with stones, led down to its door.

We had barely managed to jump indoors when lightning flashed across the darkness. It seemed as if someone had wrenched a golden branching root of a fairy-tale tree out of the ground and hurled it high into the sky.

The earth shook and rain came down in torrents.

The door leading into the room from the entry was half-open. It looked as if no one was there, but I stopped in the doorway and called out, just in case:

“May we come in?”

“Why not, walk in,” came somewhat muffled reply.

We left our rucksacks and sticks—which had served us so well on the trip we had just made to the shepherds in the mountain pastures—in the entry, and walked into the room.

The room was well kept, but looked somehow deserted. A table, two benches and a large wooden bed by the stove—that was all the furniture there was. A man of about sixty, with a bony, sullen face, was sitting on the edge of the bed. A goatskin coat was draped about his shoulders and his feet were shod in heavy unlaced boots.

Judging by the expression on our host's face our appearance stirred nothing in him, not even ordinary curiosity.

"Sit down," he said. Thrusting a long home-made pipe into his moustache-covered mouth, he blew out a cloud of smoke.

The storm was raging right over the roof. The house shook with every thunder-clap and the simple crockery tinkled in the hanging cupboard.

The man appeared indifferent to everything, both to the storm and to us. Now and then he straightened the coat on his shoulders and in a strange sort of way pulled up one leg after the other with his hands.

"Are you ill?" I asked in an effort to start a conversation.

"That's right," he answered reluctantly.

"What is it?"

He glanced at me as though considering



whether he should answer or not, and brought out with some reluctance:

"Legs ailing."

"Have you had it long?" one of my companions inquired, a medical student from Uzhgorod, eager to help the sufferer there and then.

The old man measured the student with an unconcerned eye.

"Since the trenches," he said, "since the first German war."

This was said in such a typically Russian way: "the German war," the way our older people still say it somewhere in the depths of Russia.

"You're not a local man?" I asked.

"I am a local man," the man replied, "but I come from Russia."

"Been here long?"

"Since 1915. War prisoner."

"But why didn't you go home then?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "The people here aren't strangers.... I married ... children came ... and there I have no one."

"What parts do you come from, I wonder?" asked Anna Mamulya, the zootechnician who had taken us to the shepherds.

"I'm from Smolensk," the old man said gruffly, "from the village Punevo."

I started.

"Is that near Ogryzkovo? Why, I was in your village only last year!"

Our host's face remained impassive. He took my words quite indifferently, although his further terse replies elicited that he had not only been born at Punevo, but had lived there until the age of twenty, till he was recruited for the army.

He himself asked us no questions about anything at all and was not very sorry, apparently, when we stopped questioning him. I could not understand whether it was the indifference of a man whom life had dealt too many blows, so many that everything in him had become calloused and scarred, and no joy, not even the joy of remembrance could break through the welts, or was it caution of a cruelly deceived man? Or perhaps it was his illness that had reduced him to such a state of insensibility to everything except his malady, or, who knows, maybe it was everything put together.

After that we talked only about our own affairs: about the mail awaiting us at the hotel; tomorrow's lecture which was to be given by Yuri Lokota, the medical student, in his native village near Snegovets; the needs of the shepherds tending the collective farm's sheep on the mountain pastures. We talked on all these sub-

jects and took no further notice of our taciturn host.

The storm moved on beyond the pass. From our little window we could see it dragging the steaming edge of the downpour after it. It grew lighter. A line of pure blue sky cleared up over the mountains and began growing wider and wider. There was a splash of sunlight, but a jolly, thin rain still continued in Snegovets.

We could leave now. We bid our host good-bye, but he went on puffing at his pipe and merely nodded in reply.

The rain stopped altogether. It was warm and damp outdoors. Tiny rivulets rippled down the road, ringing merrily and sparkling in the sun. We made our way to the centre of the town, jumping across these streams and the little muddy pools which had formed in the dents in the road. Anna Mamulya went home, while we returned to the hotel.

It took us almost an hour to restore everything to order, tidy ourselves up and clean our clothes. Lokota was going to his native village and I decided to see him as far as the crossing.

We left our room to go downstairs, but stopped in amazement on the top landing of our steep wooden staircase: coming up the stairs, one hand leaning on his stick and the other holding on to

the handrail, was the owner of the cottage where we had taken shelter during the storm.

He mounted with difficulty, step by step, and we could see the tremendous effort it was costing him. Sweat poured down his bony face, it flooded his eyes and he kept wiping it away with the sleeve of his homespun shirt.

His appearance was so unexpected, I should even say unbelievable, that we both stood stock-still.

Evidently something very important had made the man leave his bed, ill as he was, and drag himself all the way to the hotel from his house which was no less than a kilometre away.

Catching sight of us the old man stopped and, breathing heavily, asked:

“When was it you’d been to Punevo?”

“Last summer,” I replied.

“Summer . . .” the old man repeated tonelessly, and taking a step backwards he screwed up his eyes as if there was something he wanted to see in the distance but could not for the blinding sun.

“There’s a hillock there,” he spoke slowly. “We used to play knucklebones there when we were kids. . . . And at the foot of the hillock there’s a little brook. . . . And there was our house, near the brook. . . . Good God, it was beautiful!”

He said no more, turned round and limped down the stairs.

... Lokota's voice brought me back to earth.

"I say," he said, taking me by the arm, "is it really so beautiful there?"

"Very," I replied, although I remembered perfectly the dismal rust-coloured hillock and the barely noticeable brook in the bogged up meadow, and the ugly, bald-looking village cast by some ill chance into the depths of a coppice. I also remembered that the inhabitants of Punevo had been planning to move to a more cheerful spot.



## IT WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING

### 1

**O**ld Vasil Yatsina stayed in hospital for half a year. He grew worse and worse with every day. Doctors could do nothing more to help the old man. Then Yatsina asked to be allowed to go

home to his native village, to die there in Verkhovina.

He was not afraid of death and awaited it with faith in the kingdom of heaven.

"After all," Vasil reflected, "there must be a place somewhere where a man is paid for all he has suffered in this world: neither house nor land of his own, neither horse nor ox. . . . Looking for work amongst strangers, that's all the life he's ever had. . . ."

And yet he was a master at felling timber, and what a master too! Was there another woodcutter in the Carpathians to equal Vasil Yatsina?

The Virgin Mary most probably had an angel who noted all this down, counted it up and one day he'd suddenly speak up:

"Look, Mother of God, what this man Vasil Yatsina of the Paseka village has gone through! Of course," the angel would add, "when the country became a Soviet state it gave Yatsina a steady job, a cut of land and even allotted him a house, so it appears that the old man had a breathing spell towards the end of his life. . . ."

At that Yatsina himself would ask for the floor:

It's the Gospel truth, he would say, life is easier now. But then everyone knows that Yatsina has a daughter, Anna, and that she is still

unmarried because beauty has been denied her. Yatsina himself does not see it of course, but that's what people say. Maybe there really is no beauty in her at all—her face is narrow and her eyes look red with weeping. Others provide a dowry to cloak a misfortune like this. Well, and Yatsina, too, has been thinking about this dowry all his life long.

It seemed that a suitable husband had been found for Anna too—Ivan Sheketa of the Chor-noye village, son of Yatsina's late kinsman Andrei. Ivan was a tall, strong, handsome young fellow, but he had neither house nor home. He either felled timber whenever God sent an order to the sawmill, or tended sheep in the mountain pastures, or just worked as odd-job man for Mikola Varga, the wealthy landowner, but it was always working for others.

In old Sheketa's lifetime the two friends came to an agreement that if Yatsina's daughter could bring in a dowry of even a small plot of land, a house and a cow, Ivan would take her in marriage. Ivan himself gave his consent to this at the time. Of course, he may have agreed for the simple reason that he did not wish to contradict his father, or because he was sick and tired of living in the homes of others. Even a bird builds a nest of its own!



Well then, Yatsina began petitioning for the dowry. Good God, the effort he put into it, the strange districts he journeyed to! But he did not get anywhere, you know—he could howl or claw the ground with his teeth for all the good it would do him! And if it wasn't for the Soviet government he'd be a fine one, Vasil Yatsina sure would be! What would he leave Anna with? But now she had a dowry of a hectare and a half of land—granted Yatsina by the new government—and a house. All of it was Anna's. The only reason why he hadn't joined the collective farm was because he dreaded depriving his daughter of a dowry. Perhaps that's something the angel does not know that you've got to put in your own bit of land when you're joining a collective farm? And what was a dowry without land?

This is the conversation Yatsina carried on with himself while the horses, hired by Anna, bore him from Snegovets to his native village.

It was a clear, frosty morning. The road, climbing gradually, wound up the narrow valley. Sheer snow-covered mountains crowded round it. The forests—impenetrable in summer—were quite transparent now. And above the forests, on the mountain pastures right under the sky, snow sparkled with a whiteness so blinding, it hurt your eyes to look at it.

Anna was striding along the road beside the closed sleigh, and Yatsina caught glimpses of her broad, slightly round-shouldered back. The runners creaked, the horses stepped unhurriedly, and the girl kept urging them on with a long switch.

"Anna," the old man called, "whose horses are they?"

"Mikola Varga's," Anna replied without turning round.

"How much are you paying him?"

"Eighty, both ways."

"Eighty," the old man echoed soundlessly and thought this a large, regrettable expense.

Whether from the fresh air or the awareness that his daughter was taking him home and he would once again see his new house, to which he had not yet become accustomed, the pain within him seemed to slumber. And "this world" again beckoned to old Yatsina.

"Anna!"

"What is it, Father?" and now she turned round.

Vasil saw his daughter's kindly face and a feeling of guilt towards her stirred in his heart. He had never once said a tender word to her, not since she was a mere baby; he had never asked her what worried her, what was it she wanted.

All their lives their only conversation had been of work, their daily bread, and warm clothes of sorts for the winter. The thought chilled the old man and he shivered in spite of his fur coat. Why, the girl was the only being near and dear to him in the whole wide world!

"Anna, I wish you'd tell me about things. Tell me what's new in the village, eh?" he asked her and sighed.

"What's there to tell?" Anna replied with reluctance. "They're planning."

"That I know about them planning in the forests," the old man muttered, displeased with his daughter's reply. "But what about the village?"

"They're planning everywhere now—in the forest and at the farm."

"And what's new at the farm?" Yatsina pricked up his ears.

"They say there's not enough land, but the income must not be less than at the lowland farms."

"Hmph, so that's where they're heading!"

But Anna seemed not to hear.

"They want to start keeping bees," she went on, "they're building hives already."

"You don't say!" amazement caught the old man's breath and he coughed.

"And come spring they'll begin doing the cattle over, to make it more profitable...."

"What's that? Doing the cattle over?" Yatsina asked. "God created cattle. What are you babbling about?"

"I'm not babbling, Father, why should I?" Anna said in injured tones. "Learned people came from Snegovets or was it Kiev itself and explained everything. Kalina Sizak, the blacksmith's daughter, came to see me, she's in charge of the dairy now. 'Anna,' she said, 'send in an application, join the dairy farm association, we'll send you away for a course of study, and when you're through you'll work on the farm.' And then some members of the Komsomol came to see me the day before yesterday...."

"Drop it!" Yatsina even raised himself up on his pillows in alarm. "You drop it Anna, understand? With no land of your own you'll be like a branch chopped off a tree. Who'll take you without any land?" The old man choked with anger. "Others your age have growing children. If you have your own piece of land, you'll have a husband and children—you'll have everything! And it's no blacksmith's daughter you should take after! Remember that, Anna!"

"I know," Anna replied. "Why are you shout-

ing so? That's what I told them—I wasn't coming."

The old man calmed down. They went on in silence for a while.

Yatsina, glancing about him as though afraid some one might overhear them, spoke again:

"And has Ivan been to see you?"

Anna flushed and dropped her eyes.

"Just once after you'd been taken to hospital," she answered softly.

"Say anything?" the old man brightened up.

"He was silent mostly. He came in, asked about you, then lit his pipe. He sat and smoked and smoked without saying a word. He had new boots on and a new coat trimmed with green flannel. He's working at the sawmill now. All he could talk about was his team.... Our fellows met Ivan in Chornoye during the holiday and he treated them to beer."

This news amazed Yatsina. So that's the way matters were shaping out with Ivan while he, Yatsina, lay in hospital! But what was so unexpected in this after all? Had not the life of Yatsina himself, or that of his neighbour on the left, or the one on the right, or of all those men living in Trans-Carpathia for that matter, become like a raft carried into midstream by the current, so

fast you couldn't keep up with it? It was the same with Ivan....

Anxiety gripped Yatsina. Old Sheketa was dead and buried. Would Ivan keep his word? Six months was a long time nowadays! And Ivan's earlier life was nothing compared to his present one. Vasil's troubled heart sought reassurance. "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter," the old man's bloodless lips kept whispering, "Ivan won't be able to manage without some land of his own! And as for his new boots and coat, that's neither a roof over his head nor a farm," old Yatsina consoled himself, but it was more for his daughter's benefit than his own.

Anna turned away and burst into silent tears. She seldom cried, but now she could not hold back her tears. Was she sorry for her father, or was she hurt by her unrequited love for Ivan? Her father had inadvertently reminded her again that Ivan did not love her, that he had agreed to tie himself to her merely because their fathers had arranged the match.

And now, walking behind the horses and thinking of her loneliness, Anna recalled, for some reason, a story which a young teacher had read to them on winter evenings in the village library.

Members of the Komsomol had gone from house to house, inviting those who wanted to

attend. They had knocked on Anna's window too. Anna felt embarrassed at first, sitting in the library. But as the teacher read on, Anna felt more and more perturbed by the fate of those young girls in that small mining town of Krasnodon—carefree and unaware of the disaster creeping up on them. The Germans occupied their town and life went off the rails. What the book said was very frightening. Anna had a feeling that the story about those girls and boys who were very dear to her somehow, would probably end in their death. But in spite of this, everything in their lives was full of light, friendship, and that great happiness which Anna herself had never known.

But why did she recall those boys and girls now?

Anna's mind was in a turmoil, and she wept. . . .

## 2

At about midday a youngster of fifteen or so was riding a horse at a gallop along the road to the logging camps in the mountains. Sighting the horseman, the woodcutters stopped working. They stood in the snow on a steep, almost sheer slope, between the huge steel-blue trunks of the beeches, and tried to guess what news this boy,

who came galloping towards them along the narrow gorge, was bringing them.

The youngster reined in his horse, threw back his head, and cupping his hands round his mouth, shouted, drawing out the words:

“She-ke-ta! I-van!”

The man, whose name was called, was a tanned, black-browed woodcutter, with brown eyes and a forelock of sweat-damp hair escaping from under his hat; he drove his axe into the tree trunk and called back:

“I’m Sheketa! What do you want?”

“Old Yatsina’s dying!” the boy shouted, “he’s calling you, wants you to come to him!”

Sheketa frowned. “Too bad,” he said quietly.

Ivan Sheketa respected old Yatsina and looked upon him as his second father. He suddenly remembered how the two of them—the toil-bent old man and the strong, young, vigorous fellow—used to go about in search of work. Now the old man was dying, and although the news was not unexpected, for there had been talk for some time that Yatsina would not pull through, Sheketa felt deeply grieved. His sorrow was augmented by a feeling of guilt towards old Vasil for the truth which he, Ivan, would have to tell the dying man. And the thought of this made Ivan frown deeper still. Calling to the youngster



to wait for him, Ivan went to the foreman to ask for leave of absence.

Sheketa changed his clothes in the shed, walked down hill and mounted the perspiring horse; he pulled the youngster on to the saddle behind him and rode off.

During the first part of the ride Ivan's thoughts were of the old man, of whether it was necessary for man to die and could not something be done to enable him live for ever. During the second part of the trip—from Chornoye to Paseka—Ivan tried to think how best to tell the truth to the dying man, so that he should understand and not judge him severely. But he could not think of a way.

The road, breaking away from the forest, lay along a valley, then rose up the hillside, and the Paseka village now spread before Ivan's eyes.

There was no one near Yatsina's cottage, smoke curled lazily from the chimney, and Ivan knew that he was not too late, that Yatsina was still alive.

Ivan parted with the boy at the wooden chapel, some little distance from the house, and continued on foot. He believed that if his meeting with the old man were put off a little longer, everything would be settled of its own accord, and he would not have to explain anything to

the dying man. To rid himself of these thoughts Ivan turned his mind to his work in the forest. He felt better at once but a new anxiety disturbed him: the Yarovets logging team, who were competing with his own team from Chornoye, were threatening this time to get so far ahead that he was afraid there would be nothing else for it but to wave them good-bye. It was a pleasant sort of anxiety. Without it, Ivan thought, life would be dull and wasted, as it were. With these thoughts in mind, Ivan approached the door of Yatsina's cottage.

Anna met him in the dim entry. They shook hands in silence, trying to avoid looking at each other. Anna showed him into the room, but did not follow him in and stayed behind in the entry.

The room was hot and stuffy and smelt of medicines. Old Yatsina lay on a high wooden bed, covered with a goatskin coat. His head was thrown back and it was not clear whether he was asleep or was staring intently at something on the ceiling. He did not even move a muscle when a board creaked beneath Ivan's foot.

Ivan stopped by the bed, wondering what he should do next. But then the old man stirred and shifted his eyes from the ceiling to Ivan. His eyes were lifeless, dim, expressing nothing.

"That you, Ivan?" Yatsina muttered.

"Yes, yes," Ivan bent over him. "You sent for me and here I am."

"'Tis true I sent for you," Yatsina spoke as if he were trying to remember why he had wanted Ivan. But remembering, apparently, his eyes lit up, he began to move about under the coat, and raised himself on his elbows.

"I'm dying, Ivan, see?" his tone was somewhat puzzled. "Well, what do you say to that?"

Ivan wanted to say what was usually said in such cases: "Now, now, why think you're dying! You'll get well and live some more!" But he could not bring himself to utter this lie, and he stood silent, breaking the needles off the fir twig stuck behind the ribbon of his hat which he was holding in his hands.

"It's all right, it's all right," Yatsina said, "the old must die and the young must live...."

And suddenly, as if catching himself up, he turned on his side, overcoming his weakness with an effort, and started fumbling with his hand in the straw under his pillow.

Yatsina extracted a folded up piece of cloth and unwrapped it hurriedly, as if afraid of being late. There was some money in it.

"Here, Ivan, that's for a horse or a cow," the old man whispered rapidly and held out the money in a hand that shook with weakness. "Per-

haps there's not enough for a cart, but try to manage it yourself somehow. . . . It's all I could do, Ivan, I'm sorry. . . ."

Sweat stood out on Ivan's back and his lips grew numb. And just as a minute before he could not tell the old man a lie, now he could not bring himself to tell him the truth.

Ivan put his hat on the table and carefully taking the money from Yatsina's hands he counted it over twice. After that he put it away in his trouser pocket and secured it with a large safety-pin.

The old man gave a sigh of relief. A great weariness came over him and he sank back on his pillows.

With heavy heart Ivan now awaited his blessing, his parting words or advice. But, to his surprise, they were not forthcoming.

"Go, Ivan," Yatsina said suddenly. "I'll doze a bit. Tell Anna, too, that I'll doze a bit."

He did, in fact, fall asleep at once, his breathing noisy and jerky.

Ivan walked out quietly and closed the door behind him. Anna was waiting for him in the entry. She asked him no questions and he told her nothing. He would have liked to leave immediately, but something held him there. The muscles on his cheeks were working under his

tanned, weather-beaten skin. He was mad at the whole world and was on the verge of telling Anna what he had not said to the old man, but a look at her eyes—gazing at him and expecting something from him—softened Ivan. His anger passed as momentarily as it had flared up.

“Well, Anna,” he pulled his hat down low, “in case anything happens, get in touch with the Makovits lumber camp. I’m working on the fourth team there.”

Anna saw him off across the backyard, which was a short cut to the road into the forest. Ivan leapt smartly over the high wattle fence with only a flash of his new white jacket. And either because he now found himself in the open, or because the leap had invigorated him, Ivan smiled suddenly, and turning to Anna said gently:

“Anna, don’t take it too hard . . . it can’t be helped. . . .”

Two days later Vasil Yatsina died. Anna took her father’s death with resignation. It surprised people that she neither cried nor sobbed over him, and only her face grew longer still and her features sharper.

Anna did everything herself: bargained with the village carpenter over the price of the coffin, and laid out the old man herself. And all because she had never been accustomed in her life to

having help from anyone. But no matter what Anna did during those days, her thoughts were not of her father but of Ivan. It seemed a great sin to her at first, and she chased these thoughts away, but they came back unnoticed and uninvited. And finally she gave in to them entirely with a secret belief that this sin would be forgiven her.

After the funeral Ivan came up to Anna and told her that he would come and see her on Saturday.

As soon as she returned from the cemetery, Anna began to make ready for Saturday. She whitewashed the walls, and lighted the stove, as if Ivan were to come right then and not a week hence.

Kalina Sizak, the blacksmith's daughter, full-bosomed and reddish-haired, dropped in on Anna and asked:

"Perhaps you're scared to be alone, don't hesitate to say so, we'll arrange for the Kom-somol girls to come and stay with you the first few nights, or I'll come myself."

This solicitude touched Anna; another time she would have gladly had Kalina stay with her, but now she shook her head:

"No, there's no need. I'm not scared."

Her thoughts of Ivan grew more and more

daring, and she already pictured their future life together in intimate and familiar detail. Here on the nail by the door Ivan would hang his new jacket, from that window there Anna would watch Ivan coming home from work, at this table here the two of them would eat their supper together....

Coming out into the yard Anna noticed a plank hanging loose on the front gate. From force of habit she turned towards the entry to fetch a hammer and fix the gate, but a thought stopped her: "Let Ivan do it." She even closed her eyes for a clearer vision of Ivan nailing this plank into place.

Anna, unused as she was to idleness, could now spend hours sitting on a bench, remembering the way Ivan had said it to her there, by the fence: "Don't take it too hard." No one, not even her father, had ever spoken such kind words to her....

### 3

The woodcutters spent the whole week up in the mountains. They slept in log cabins and only came home to their families on Sundays. The village would at once become noisy and lively. The sawmill lorries usually brought the men

down on Saturday evening and took them back again at dawn on Monday. But the following Saturday—the day Ivan promised to come—no lorries arrived in Paseka, neither did they appear next morning, nor by dinner-time that day. They only came into the village with the first stars.

Anna heard one of the lorries stop near her house. Snow crunched under the window, the door banged and Ivan walked into the room.

Although Anna had been expecting Ivan, yet now that her waiting was over, she grew so confused she could not even hold a match to light the lamp.

“I’ll do it,” said Ivan and, feeling his way to the table, lighted the lamp himself. Ivan had brought in a delicious smell of frost and forest.

When the wick was burning brightly and twilight receded into the corners of the room, Ivan sat down on a bench and lit his pipe. Anna still stood by the table without taking her eyes off Ivan.

“You must be hungry after the trip, Ivan,” she brought out at last, “I’ll get supper.”

“Don’t,” said Ivan, “I’m not hungry.” He paused. “I’ve been trying to get here since last night, but you see we’ve been detained. The Ya-



rovets fellows got it into their heads to beat us, and they have in fact jumped ahead. And it's all because we were taking our work too easily. That's what our Party secretary said too, that we were too easy-going. He says: 'You've only been worrying that your output shouldn't drop, instead of thinking how to increase it.' He's right, too. That's how things work out, you see," Ivan's words were pensive, "the best is not always the best."

"But never mind," Ivan brightened up, "next time we'll show them what's what, we'll make the forest dance, I swear to God we will!"

"You know, Anna, our teams are not organized the way they ought to be," he continued. "Take me, for example: I fell a tree, I lop off the branches and I deliver it to the clearing. Just you count the time I spend doing all that!"

Ivan was carried away in his excitement and it affected Anna too.

"The men should be placed properly," he said. "One lot does the felling, another lops off the branches and the third delivers the logs to the clearing.

"And we have another idea, too," Ivan said in a confidential tone after a long pause; he was obviously impatient to share something very vital with her. "We have an idea to address a letter

to all the woodcutters in Verkhovina. The letter must state what we are pledging ourselves to do—the output and the time limit.” Ivan relapsed into silence and pulled busily at his pipe. “But don’t you tell anyone. It’s not to be talked about yet, we’re only just drafting the letter.”

Ivan raised his eyes, and as though he had just noticed Anna standing before him, remembered that the purpose of his coming was not to tell her all this but something quite different. He remembered and his eagerness died down at once.

Anna noticed the sudden frown on Ivan’s face. Her heart cringed from a premonition of some evil.

“Why are you standing, Anna,” he said without looking at her, “sit down....”

Anna slowly sank on to the bench.

“Don’t be angry with me,” Ivan said gently. “I don’t want to lie to you.... I have no love for you and never have had.... Father did not think of that. He did what everyone else did. As long as there was a house of sorts! But I simply can’t. Why should I ruin my life? Don’t think ill of me, Anna. I don’t want you to be unhappy—nor me.... That’s how it is....”

Ivan stopped talking. A little later he unpinned his pocket, took out the money given him by Yatsina, and put it on the table.

"It's all here, Anna. I took the money so as not to worry him when he lay dying. I could not tell the truth to him then. You're thinking, perhaps, that it's easy for me to speak the truth now?"

Anna felt numb all over. She felt neither hurt nor grief, neither pity for herself, nor hatred for Ivan. There was only one thing she was afraid of: to realize all at once that everything had collapsed, that all her dreams and hopes have been mowed down with a scythe.

"Have you found someone else?" she asked and her voice shook.

"No, I haven't looked for anyone else," Ivan replied, getting up. "Some day she'll come along herself . . . and it'll be the same with you."

Anna was mute. Her shoulders sagged and her tearless eyes stared vacantly at a fixed point: the yellow light of the lamp. She did not even hear Ivan go.

#### 4

Anna stayed indoors for three days, alone, without thoughts, without desires. Towards the end of the third day, however, her loneliness became unbearable. She walked up and down the room, not knowing what to do. In the evening,

throwing a black shawl over her shoulders, she left the house and dragged her feet slowly down the long village street.

It was cold. The village was already asleep. A new moon floated in the sky, high above the white-clad mountains. The trees stood motionless, gripped by the frost. Their thin branches looked like white caterpillars with black bellies.

Without meeting a soul, Anna got to the end of the village. It was quiet there, deserted, and all that could be heard in the stillness was the faint gurgle of a little ice-free mountain stream that sounded like someone jingling a handful of silver coins.

The loneliness that had driven Anna out of the house now brought her back to the village again. She walked past houses curled up in sleep beneath the fluffy snow. Light was still burning in some of the windows here and there, and Anna could hardly resist the temptation of knocking on someone's window. But what would she tell the people, how explain her coming at this late hour? The nearer she got to her house the more unbearable her loneliness became. It bore down upon her and bent her to the ground like a great load beyond her strength, while she wanted to straighten up and take a deep breath. Before she knew why she was doing it, Anna ran towards

the blacksmith's house, which had a carved little gallery and a thatched roof. The windows were dark: Mikola Sizak and his reddish-haired daughter Kalina were already asleep. But Anna ran across the timber walk to the front porch and knocked. Light flared up in the small frozen window and steps were heard behind the door.

"Who's there?"

"It's me."

The door opened. Kalina, in a nightgown, drowsy from sleep, stood holding a lamp.

"Anna, you? Has something happened?"

"No, no, nothing," Anna breathed the words out, "it's just that I got scared alone."

...Kalina sat on the bed, hugging her legs, her chin thrust into her knees, and listened to Anna with that peculiar undisguised curiosity with which women always listen to stories of love. But with every word of Anna's her curiosity waned. Kalina's plump, cheerfully dimpled face grew more and more pensive. She pulled a goatskin coat off the back of her bed and threw it over her shoulders.

Once having made up her mind, after much hesitation, to tell Kalina everything that had occurred between her and Ivan, Anna was convinced that her friend would side with her against Ivan. But Kalina merely sighed.

"I don't know, I don't know what to say, Anna. You won't believe me, will you, if I tell you that it's not as bad as all that. But you can't blame Ivan either. He's right. Why should he ruin his life by marrying without love? In the old days a father forced one or perhaps it was need—but that was in the old days. Why, tell me yourself...."

Anna's heart stopped beating, so unexpected were the words she heard from her friend. It amazed her that Kalina and Ivan should have spoken the same words as if they both knew something that Anna did not.

"What am I to do then?" Anna asked helplessly.

"Don't think about him. And as for your own self, you've got to live differently, you can't go on living in the old way now!" Kalina's face again assumed its usual roguish expression. "Come, join our farm, Anna, you won't regret it and your life will be different then, honest it will."

"Why does she keep harping on the collective farm and the dairy?" Anna was thinking resentfully. "Goodness, haven't I tended the cows on the count's estate for five whole years? That was work and so is this, it's all the same."

“Further north, you know,” Kalina went on, “near Kostroma, the milkmaids get as much as sixty litres a day from some of the cows!”

“Just bragging!” said Anna.

“Bragging?” Kalina flared up. “Why, I’ve got photographs of those milkmaids and you say they’re just bragging!”

Kalina slipped down from her bed and, lifting the lid of a small wooden trunk, took out a batch of photographs, New Year postcards with tinsel angels, and an illustrated page torn out of a magazine, pretty frayed at the edges, wrapped up in a handkerchief. Kalina put the magazine page on the table and smoothed it out carefully with her hands.

Smiling girls in white overalls glanced up at Anna from the page. Another picture showed several skewbald, fat cows. The photographs had been taken somewhere near a distant and strange town called Kostroma. And now Kalina read out the text under the photos.

“Reads well,” Anna thought not without envy, but it never occurred to her that Kalina had long since learned each line by heart.

Anna, moving up closer to the table, heard how the champion cows—Minutka, Beauty and Cherry—were cared for by the milkmaids in Kostroma.

“And we’ll get a breed like this too,” Kalina said, “or won’t we? Perhaps we haven’t got enough patience? Or we won’t get help? Then you and I will go to that town, Kostroma, and ask them for advice.” She hugged Anna and clung to her. “Oh, Anna! Just think—a dairy at every collective farm, and a Beauty in every dairy! And beauties like this one feeding on our meadows! ‘Whose cattle?’ the good folks will ask, ‘That’s Paseka cattle, from their own farm,’ they’ll be told.”

For a moment Anna almost fell under Kalina’s spell. She fancied that not only Kalina but she, too, was seeing big, fat cows in the tall grass, and was hearing people ask “Whose cattle?” But suddenly Anna remembered the land that her father had struggled for so long in order to secure her happiness. Give it up? Never! Well, what was she, Anna, without this land? A chopped off branch. And what if Ivan changed his mind? What would she have to offer him? And who would help her? Oh no, she’d got to hold on to her piece of land and give it to no one, never give it up, never, never!

At the mere thought that she had almost given in to Kalina, terror seized Anna and a shudder ran down her frame.

“They’re lying!” Anna said abruptly, “it’s all



a lot of fibs!" She raised her voice now and poked her finger furiously at the pictures, "None of it exists! And there's no such town either!"

And without saying good-bye, she strode out.

## 5

On market day in Snegovets Anna bought a cow. The brown and rather skinny animal led by a rope trudged behind her mistress along the road to Paseka. Anna had planned to be home before dark, but had changed her mind and stayed the night at the settlement. She walked the cow across the village and into her own yard during the dinner hour. People wondered at her purchase and even the chairman of the Village Soviet came out on his porch and cried:

"Look at the foolish woman, buying a cow in the autumn!"

But Anna paid no attention to his words. She was very proud she had a cow of her own now and that everyone was looking at it as it walked behind its mistress, sedately nodding its head.

Next Anna bought a cartload of hay from Mikola Varga, together with the old cart. She did not have enough money to pay for her purchases, so she promised Varga to work off her debt in the spring.

The cartload of hay, too, Anna drove across the village at midday and once again people stared at her purchase. After she had unloaded the hay she set to repairing the cart, rough-hewing new timber and planing laths. They could hear her working in her yard all day long. Every now and then she would drop her work and run to the shed to look at her cow. It was not a good-looking animal, but this did not worry Anna at all. Now, she thought, she had erected an absolutely insurmountable barrier between herself and the life into which Kalina tried to draw her. You couldn't step over a barrier like that! And Anna was glad of it. She even thought she would like to come across Kalina: what would the blacksmith's daughter have to say to her now?

But when she did, Kalina was as friendly as ever and expressed neither criticism nor approval of what Anna was doing, not by word or by look. She did not talk about the dairy either, although Anna had heard from others that Kalina had received an answer to her letter from the farm near Kostroma, the distant town in the north.

But neither care for the cow nor her household worries could appease Anna's feeling of loneliness and melancholy. After all nothing was

changed in her life. It was a lonely and joyless life before and it was the same now. If it bored her before, now it oppressed her even more....

Ivan did not appear in Paseka again, and thoughts of him were no longer so bitterly mortifying and tormenting. But Anna could not forget him, nor did she wish to.

On Saturday nights, when the sawmill lorries rushed past her window, Anna still waited and hoped that at any moment now one of them would stop by her house. But the lorries ran past without stopping and for a long time she would hear their motors working in the square in front of the Village Soviet, and the woodcutters calling to each other in loud voices, as they went their different ways homewards.

Somehow even these moments of vain waiting were precious to Anna....

## 6

Early in January a rumour spread across the five villages on the Makovits Mountain that the local woodcutters were going to issue a challenge to all the other woodcutters in Verkhovina, and that on the coming Sunday they would be writing them a joint letter setting down their promised output and time limit.

This news reached the Village Soviet, after which it was spread by the propaganda workers—Kalina Sizak and other members of the Komsomol, and the two schoolteachers—to their respective propaganda districts of five households each.

Yurko Petelitsa, the village crier, eighty years old but still robust, was formerly a woodcutter too, but now it was his three sons who worked in the woods. On learning of this piece of news from his grandson, he strode into the Village Soviet and shouted, waving his arms about:

“Thank you, thank you, Comrade Chairman! When it comes to making an announcement about a loss, or a meeting or a cinema show, it’s Yurko Petelitsa, but when it’s news like this, Yurko is thrust aside! Thank you kindly! From now on you can beat the drum yourselves, *kume*. Here, take my instrument!...” and, livid with resentment, he started pulling the strap of his old drum off his neck.

To get rid of the noisy old man, the chairman of the Soviet told Petelitsa to let the villagers know that the letter would be written in Chornoye at the sawmill office on Sunday, and that whoever wanted to attend the meeting was welcome.

Old Petelitsa, instantly pacified, started off

across the village with an air of importance, tapping his drum with his drumsticks.

He stopped for a smoke beside the smithy. Here the owners of neighbouring houses were gathered already. Anna was among them too. She had known of the woodcutters' intentions before anyone else, and this made her feel almost party to this great event.

"Look what's going on," the blacksmith said, scratching the back of his head in wonder. "Now what made them go and take on a liability like that?"

"And if they don't keep their word?" blinking his eyes asked an old man, whose sons and grandsons worked in the forest.

"Hope you get a sore on your tongue for this, *kume!*" the crier flared up.

Everyone laughed, but nevertheless they all felt a twinge of anxiety. They remembered how the Kamenits woodcutters had taken on a liability last year and had not been able to fulfil it. Their ill fame had travelled as far as Paseka, but look where's Paseka and look where's Kamenits—more than a day's ride between them!"

Stamping out his cigarette in the old woodcutters' way, Petelitsa flung up his drumsticks and marched on his way. His quavering old

voice and the beat of his drum were heard for a long time.

"Our men may have had this idea for some time," the old man said blinking again, "doing everything on the sly, they are!"

"They were measuring their strength," the blacksmith decided, "that's why they kept quiet."

"And my man never said anything either," hurriedly put in a pert young woman, wearing galoshes on her bare feet. "It was only last week he couldn't hold it any longer and told me they were out for something big. But what it was I didn't ask."

Everyone began talking at once. Some had husbands working in the woods, others—sons. Anna alone remained an outsider. Everyone knew that Yatsina's daughter had no connection with the woods now. And no one addressed a word to her.

The hurt she felt was so deep that crimson spots stood out on her face.

"I've known about this letter for a long time!" she suddenly cried out. "Ivan Sheketa told me as long as a month ago!" and threw a challenging look at the young woman in galoshes.

Sunday came. Since early morning people were stringing along the road to Chornoye. From her window Anna saw the woodcutters and their wives walk past, dressed up in their Sunday clothes. The men wore grey homespun jackets trimmed with green or black flannel, and hats with the inevitable fir twigs stuck in the bands. The women wore warm, fluffy *gunyas*\* and white, full gathered skirts.

The Komsomols harnessed the farm's horses into carts and drove those of the old people who were not up to walking all the way to Chornoye. With jingling bells the horses raced along at full speed, spattering snow dust at the people they passed in the road.

When the street emptied, Anna left her window, put her *gunya* on, tied a kerchief round her head, locked up her cottage, and started off for Chornoye.

Some two hours later she reached the two-storey building of the sawmill office.

The meeting had not yet started: more and more groups of woodcutters kept arriving from the villages. The small yard in front of the office was crowded and noisy like a fair.

\* *Gunya*—a woman's outer garment.—*Ed.*

This crowded gathering confused Anna. She tried to make her way to the door, to seek a more secluded spot, but she had barely reached the porch when she saw Ivan. He was standing in the centre of a group of young men and was telling them something. Good God, how tall he was, look at his broad shoulders, and how smartly he wore his jacket; and his hat and new boots suited him too; how jolly he looked! He must have sensed Anna's eyes fixed on him for he turned round for a moment but, seeing no one, carried on with his speech.

It would have been better to go away and not look at him. But it was more than she could do. Anna made her way through the crowd and found herself beside Sheketa.

"Hullo, Ivan," she called to him softly.

Ivan turned. His face lost all its gaiety at once.

"I wasn't coming here," Anna said hurriedly as if she were trying to justify her presence to him. "I was on my way to the settlement; I just looked in as I was passing."

They walked away to the gate where the crowd was thinner.

"Well, how's life, Anna?" Ivan asked after a long pause.

"All right."



"See the meeting we're holding today? They won't all get into the office building.... We'll have to hold it in the school, it's roomier ... and what about you, staying or going?"

"I'll see," Anna replied. "I may stay awhile.... And how did you happen to tear your jacket so, Ivan?" she asked of a sudden, noticing a rent under his arm.

"God knows," Ivan flushed, fingering the rent. "I must be growing, that's why."

"Take it off," Anna said barely audibly, "I'll sew it up. I have a needle and thread right here."

"But where, in public?" Ivan glanced behind him and blushed.

"Well, we'll go behind those carts over there," said Anna. "There's nobody there."

She walked to the other end of the square. Ivan followed her. Once behind the carts he took off his jacket and stood there in his shirt-sleeves. Anna drew a needle with a long thread from her blouse and started sewing up the ripped seam. She would have gladly gone on sewing all day long if only Ivan stayed beside her.

"The Paseka people say you've bought a cow, is it true?" Ivan asked after a silence.

"Yes. And a cart and some hay.... Why don't you come and have a look, Ivan?" she asked timidly.

"Perhaps I may one day," he answered so as not to hurt her feelings. "I've never any time. And you're wrong, Anna, not joining the collective farm. Your people have been saying: 'We'll have three people in Paseka outside the artel—two former *kurkuls*\* and Yatsina's daughter!'"

"Who could have said that I'm at one with the *kurkuls*?" Anna retorted angrily. "There's no shame in people who say such things about me!"

"Well you may not be at one with them, but you're playing into the *kurkuls*' hands all right."

"And what would I do there, at the farm?" Anna asked glumly and bent lower over her sewing.

"What the others are doing."

"I've got a farm as it is."

"And what pleasure d'you get out of it?"

"It's feeding me, thank God."

"That's not the point," Ivan sighed. "How shall I put it to you? All the people are together, while you are out of it, always alone, as if you're worse than the rest."

"I don't care if I'm worse, I don't care, I don't care!"

Anna bit off the thread and giving the jacket a shake handed it silently to Ivan.

\* *Kurkul*—a wealthy peasant, exploiting hired labour.  
—Ed.

"Oh, thank you," he said with relief. "Well, I've got to be going, Anna. The fellows will start looking for me. And do stay, you'll have plenty of time to get to the settlement."

"I don't know," she answered sadly, although she was very pleased that Ivan had asked her to stay.

Ivan went in search of his people and Anna stood watching his hat—trimmed with a fir twig and pushed far back on his head—moving in the crowd.

The meeting had in fact to be transferred to the school. The communicating door between two class-rooms was flung open and the desks moved closely together. But nevertheless a lot of people had no choice but to stand in the corridor and crane their necks.

Anna perched on a corner of a seat in that part of the room where the officials sat. Her neighbour happened to be old Petelitsa, the Paseka crier, who had arrived in Chornoye earlier than the rest.

Ivan was sitting at the presidium table between Nemesh, the youthful and red-cheeked man in charge of the lumber camp, and somebody else—a big man with a large face and clear, grey, merry eyes. This was Rusinko, the first secretary of the District Committee of the Communist Party.

Next to Rusinko sat a bald-headed, middle-aged man with a woollen muffler wound round his neck. Anna had never seen this man before. She felt sorry for him because he had the melancholy air of a man seriously ill. Now and then he turned to the secretary and said something with a smile. But his smile was sickly too.

"Grandad, who's that bald-headed man?" Anna asked Petelitsa.

"A bandit," the crier replied.

"Oh, no!"

"I'm telling the truth, a bandit he is," Petelitsa repeated, "and the ones sitting behind him, from the Yarovets lumber camp, they're all robbers, too. And he's their chief!"

"Why, have they murdered somebody?" Anna asked doubtfully.

"No," the crier shook his head, "I wouldn't tell what's not true. But they did beat our men twice and took the banner away with them each time. And now they're out to beat us a third time, to disgrace us. Proper brigands they are!"

Anna laughed: "That still doesn't make them brigands!"

But from that moment on she somehow felt no sympathy whatsoever for the man in the muffler, and it even annoyed her to see Nemesh offer him a cigarette.

The hall was noisy with people moving their chairs about, and calling out to one another.

Rusinko was not in his chair any longer. He was standing behind the table, carefully smoothing out the creases in the red table cover. He stood waiting, peering intently into the crowd as though looking for someone, and at last he said quietly, "Comrades!" and continued with more confidence:

"Comrades! I should like to tell you that of all the misfortunes that can fall to the lot of man, the most frightening is loneliness. It's bitter to live, to travel or to work in loneliness. There's no need to say more. Don't you yourselves know what it's like? Don't you know that a man grows wings when he's among friends? Loneliness is retreating from us, Soviet people, the way a fog retreats before the sun. The fact that we have gathered here today to discuss jointly an important document is something both joyful and vital, which can help our country to become richer still and make each one of us happier. And is there anyone who does not need happiness?"

At first Anna listened to the secretary with a sort of alarm, as if he were speaking of her own self, her own loneliness and the happiness she tried so hard to attain but could not. But gradually she felt her alarm recede, depart somewhere.

The secretary went on speaking, but his words no longer concerned her, Anna, but the sons of Petelitsa and Stepan Fyodorich from Chornoye, Ivan Sheketa and many others. It was their business, their life. They argued hotly, discussed things, but all of it seemed to pass Anna by.

Then Nemesh read out the letter. When he had finished, the woodcutters went up to the table and signed their names to it. They tried to appear calm but could not conceal their excitement. Sheketa could not master his emotion either. He bent over the sheet of paper and Anna, craning her neck, saw his lips move and the pen tremble in his hand.

Quite unexpectedly old Yurko Petelitsa appeared in front of the table. Anna had not even noticed him leave the seat beside her.

"What do you want, Grandad?" Nemesh asked, seeing Petelitsa's hand reach for the pen.

"What d'you mean?" the old man asked, surprised. "Am I a dissenter or something?"

"Today it's only woodcutters who are signing," Nemesh said with a smile.

"And what about us?" Petelitsa asked indignantly. "We're not weeds in the garden, Jesus be thanked! We belong to the farm and everything's all right!"

"I agree, I say so too!" Stepan Fyodorich shouted, elbowing his way to get closer to Petelitsa.

But Nemesh would not give in. "The farm is one thing and logging is another, and one does not concern the other."

"That's a good one!" Petelitsa flung his arms out. "We're collective farmers now and not just ordinary workmen, and since we're collective farmers, everything concerns us, Comrade Chairman!"

"But you're not signing a pledge, are you?" Nemesh cried angrily.

"Wait a minute, don't lose your temper, Mikhailo," the secretary touched his arm. "Don't get so angry. They are, too. We all are. It's our common cause."

There was a rumble of approval from the hall, applause broke out, and old Petelitsa breathing a sigh of triumph, dipped his pen into the inkwell twice and began writing his name painstakingly, trying to make the letters as large as possible so they'd be sure to notice his name in town afterwards.

Nowadays, no matter what the conversation started on—whether it was in Paseka, or Chornoye, or Yarovets, or just in the middle of the

road—it was sure to end in a discussion of the woodcutters' affairs.

A lecturer once came to Paseka from Uzhgorod to give a talk on the origin of man. The audience was large and they listened well. His talk over, the lecturer asked if there were any questions.

“Sure!” came from a far corner. “Comrade lecturer he’s been to Yarovets before coming to us. Well, how are the woodcutters getting on there?”

“One more question,” someone else asked. “What’s that piece of machinery the fellows have invented in Poroshkovo, they say it does the work of five men, lifting whole trees?”

The lecturer was offended: these questions had no bearing on the origin of man and he was unable to answer them. The listeners, on their part, were most dissatisfied with the lecture.

After that the Komsomols erected a wooden notice-board in front of the Village Soviet and every morning Kalina Sizak wrote on it the output results of the previous day. There was always a crowd round the notice-board, and if the results today happened to be lower than they were yesterday, they went into the office and insisted that the chairman should immediately ring up Nemesh and check up. “It can’t be, can it? They must have made a mistake somewhere.”



Feeling ran high round the notice-board each morning: men were either delighted or indignant. But for Anna it was full of a peculiar, personal meaning. It was a little window into the life of Ivan. Looking through this window she learnt how matters were going with her beloved.

Very, very early in the morning, while people were still busy in their homes, Anna would hurry to the Village Soviet to see what was the place held by the fourth team that day: was it up there, close to the soaring aeroplane, or—God forbid—down below, near the tortoise?

This lonely girl's heart craved excitement, worries and joys—everything that Anna had been deprived of in a life isolated from everyone else.

## 8

In the middle of February there was a heavy snow-fall in the mountains lasting several days. The trees stood thickly wrapped in fluffy snow and silence seemed to reign in the forest. But it only seemed so from a distance. As soon as you came out on the mountain roads the sensation of frozen stillness vanished instantly.

Horses, covered with snow, three-ton timber-carriers, loaded with trees, appeared from round

the turning every other minute. The lorry-drivers kept blowing their horns impatiently, urging on the horse-carts in front of them until they reached such places in the road where they could pass them. On the mountain side here and there, tearing through the curtain of snow came the smoke of camp-fires, the hissing of saws and the blows of axes.

A warning shout would come from up above somewhere—a moment's silence followed—and then the crown of a majestic beech-tree would begin to stir, reluctantly as it were. Another second—and a drawn-out rumble would roll over the mountains, while snow dust, flung up higher than the tree tops, like smoke after an explosion, would screen the woodcutters, rushing to clear the felled tree of branches.

At last the snow-fall stopped.

A southern breeze came up unexpectedly and it was as warm as in spring. The snow began to melt and little streams rippled down the mountains over the stones with a ringing that was still gentle. But the next day it rained and the ringing grew louder, more menacing, and thaw set in so vigorously it seemed someone had opened the water gate on the top of the mountain and the water was precipitating down in an irrepressible rush.

It filled the ravines with turbid streams and tore out of the narrow gorges into freedom, covered with pine needles and a white, flaky froth.

Roads subsided, undermined by the water, bridges broke apart with a splintering crash and vanished in the whirlpools. Timid little rivers swelled and flooded the meadows in the valleys.

No lights were put out that night in either Paseka or the other villages. People stood outside their cottages or crowded round the Village Soviet, listening to the distant roar and splash. The noise was like the boiling of a giant pot in which rocks were dragged and thrown about by the turbulent water.

The chairman of the Paseka Village Soviet grew hoarse shouting into the telephone, calling the office of the lumber camp. But the telephone girl on duty did not answer and the chairman went on shouting obstinately "Exchange!" "Exchange!" "Exchange!" By morning the village seemed to be standing on an island: the valley surrounding it was covered with muddy water.

Everything underwent an instant change. The mountains once white, smart and majestically calm became livid, clumsy and dishevelled. They even seemed to grow taller overnight, as though they had sprung up at the sound of an alarm from their long-occupied seats. Clouds crawled

along the tops of the mountains, tearing their tattered rags against the bristling woods.

Anna went to the Village Soviet, finding it hard to remain indoors. The place was crowded and filled with tobacco smoke. Pushing her way to the door, she saw Kalina. The blacksmith's daughter was sitting by a window looking pale and somehow aged.

"What a disaster, what a disaster!" old Petelitsa kept moaning.

He began recalling how some twenty years ago thaw had set in just as suddenly and every single thing had been swept away by the water. Engineers had come up from Prague then and it had taken them five months to put up the bridges again and make the roads passable.

"Five months!" the chairman winced and started rubbing his forehead.

"Not five months!" Kalina cried out suddenly. "We've given our word, haven't we? It won't take five months now!"

"Don't shout, daughter," her father said. "Wanting is one thing and doing is another."

"And no one is setting the time for it," the chairman added. "People are just telling what had happened before."

"It won't be like that now!" Kalina persisted.

Towards evening on the third day some Pase-

ka children saw several horsemen coming from the direction of Chornoye. The children raced down the street, spattering mud, and shouted, pointing to a flooded piece of land beyond the village:

“There, see? Three of them!”

Anna came running out of her cottage. All the villagers were out in the street already. They stared in the direction where the children pointed and tried to guess who could have risked making their way to Paseka at a time like this.

The horses seemed to swim rather than walk—the water came up to their bellies. It took some time before the riders managed to get to the village outskirts. The water was comparatively shallow there, but the horses pulled their legs out of the mud with difficulty. And only then did the people recognize Rusinko, Nemesh, and Popovich, the forest ranger. A bristly growth covered their cheeks, their bloodshot eyes were sunken and even Rusinko did not look as big and strong as usual. He was riding hatless because he never wore a hat, summer or winter, even when the cold was at its fiercest.

The horsemen were surrounded and plied with questions about the disaster. The women shouted all at once:

"Comrade Nemesh! Tell us about Vasil Gabovda!"

"He's all right," Nemesh replied.

"And about my man, please tell me about Stepan Mogula!"

"He's strong as an ox! It didn't do him any harm!"

"All the Paseka men are all right!" the forest ranger shouted. "But some of the Chornoye fellows have been slightly injured," and he mentioned several names.

Anna waited, frightened: now he'll name Ivan. But no, no one mentioned Sheketa. He was alive, alive, her Ivan was alive!

The men dismounted at the square; reeling from fatigue they walked towards the Village Soviet. The chairman was about to forbid the people entrance for, after all, the riders had to be given a chance to rest and dry their clothes. But the secretary took him by the arm and said:

"We need the people badly now, and the more there are the better."

It was unnecessary to summon anybody—everyone was there, old and young alike. They thronged the office and looked at the new-comers in anxious expectation.

Rusinko took his time as usual and then he said:

"Comrades, the water has begun to go down, but it has already been ascertained that round the Makovits Mountain twenty-five kilometres of road has been completely washed away and eighteen bridges, large and small, have been destroyed and carried away. Our engineers reckon it will take three months to reconstruct all this in order to resume motor and cart traffic up to the logging camps. In other words, for three months to come no timber—which the country needs—will be delivered from the Makovits Mountain."

"Three months—that's a quarter of a year!" said Kalina.

"Yes," Rusinko confirmed, "a quarter of a year. . . . And that's why we're here, to take counsel, to ask you: what is your opinion? Do you agree that no timber should be delivered for three months?"

No one expected this question to be put so bluntly. Everyone wanted to answer: "No, we don't agree," but no one knew how it could be achieved sooner. That was why they were startled when somebody asked: "And what is your own opinion about it, Comrade Secretary?"

"The Regional Party Committee considers that everything could be accomplished in as little as thirty days if the people took it upon themselves," Rusinko replied.

And although he had not told them yet how it could be managed in thirty days, they all felt a tremendous relief and a certainty that it would be done. Everyone started talking and moving about at once.

"Well and that's what we think about it, too!" old Petelitsa called out. "We gave our word and we've got to keep it. Only we must all set to it as one man. Perhaps the womenfolk too, Comrade Secretary, could help us?"

"Why should the women be nothing but helpers?" Rusinko smiled. "They're a force in themselves." He gave the gathering a quick look over and paused when he came to Anna, standing by the window. "What is your name?" he asked.

Anna replied, embarrassed.

"Now then," Rusinko continued, "do you think Anna Yatsina would be able to stay idle in her cottage if the matter concerned the property of the state and the honour of the woodcutters? Do you think that this property and our honour means less to her than to any of the men? Don't be misled by her quiet and shy look. I can tell by her eyes that she's a good worker! And if we look a bit further ahead and stop to think, it's not simply timber that's coming along these roads and bridges, comrades, it's our future—ours and hers, Anna Yatsina's. That's right, isn't it?"



"Right it is," said someone standing beside Anna. She turned and saw Kalina.

"Let us begin without waiting for the water to go down completely," Rusinko went on to say. "We've got to get our spades, axes, saws and picks together quickly. Anything that's out of order goes into the repair shop right away."

"We'll see to it," the blacksmith nodded.

"And how about the timber for the bridges?" the chairman asked. "We'll need plenty of timber."

Rusinko frowned and Nemesh emitted such a deep sigh that the flame in the lamp flickered and almost went out.

"It's timber that's getting us down," said Nemesh. "How shall we bring it down? We'll have to lay a new road from the logging camps."

"It's a difficult job," old Petelitsa shook his head.

"And what's more, it takes time," said the secretary. "Besides, we'll have to send four teams of woodcutters up there. We've got it all mapped out."

"In other words it's not the delivery of timber alone that's going to fall behind during that month?" the chairman asked.

"So it seems, so it seems," Rusinko repeated thoughtfully.

Anna remembered that Sunday in Chornoye and Ivan bent over a sheet of paper, and the pen which trembled in his hand, and the notice-board in front of the Village Soviet which no one looked at any longer because the figures on it stood frozen to the spot. Anna felt so depressed and sad, as though she and Ivan and everybody else had their hands tied.

## 9

The water went down slowly and reluctantly, as it were, leaving behind it a deposit of sticky mud, heaped up snags, stones and trees. Without waiting for it to go down completely, men and women from all the villages began to make their way along the flooded and mutilated roads up the Makovits Mountain, carrying spades and hand-barrows. When they got to the areas allocated to each village, they started digging trenches, building embankments, and reinforcing them with stones.

Members of the collective farms were divided into shifts—one working by day, the other by night. In the evening fires were lighted along the entire length of the road. They looked like a string of camp lights to the men working in the logging camps high up in the mountains.

Anna asked to be put on Kalina's team. The blacksmith's daughter was glad to have her. Together they trudged through the squelching mud to their working area, near where a small river entered the valley from a mountain gorge.

Only on reaching their destination did they see the extent of the damage done by the water. Where timbered bridges stood only a short while ago, nothing but splintered, awry piles now jutted out of the water. The road, cut into the mountain side, had either been wiped out or buried under an avalanche. The layer of soil had been washed away in many places, baring a reddish rock, covered all over with cracks. Masses of roots, scoured by the flood, hung in the air like the legs of a giant spider.

"Mother of God!" Anna whispered. "How can all this be put right?"

Even Kalina with her unquenchable spirit was awed in the face of this elemental destruction. For a moment she, like Anna, stood numb with despair. But soon it gave way to stubbornness, to a passionate longing to conquer, to overcome the elements.

When Anna once again whispered: "Mother of God!" Kalina snapped angrily: "Why don't you stop whimpering, Anna? Come on!"

They started working in silence. With lowered eyes, looking at no one, Anna picked up some earth on her spade and threw it on to the handbarrow. The mound of earth filling the barrow seemed a paltry pinch compared to what had to be shovelled up in order to build a road here again. "Thirty days! Why, even three months wouldn't do it," Anna was thinking, "and I'm a fine one too, swallowing everything they said at the meeting!"

The longer she worked, the angrier she became and the more earth she threw on to the barrow. When Kalina, who was paired off with Anna, commented that the load was getting too heavy, Anna said spitefully, without looking up, "Never mind, it won't kill you!" Kalina flushed, glanced at Anna in surprise but did not say anything.

Some two hours later the work, which was in full swing in the whole area, acquired an inner rhythm; an outsider would not have noticed it, but each member of the team felt it and was afraid to disrupt it. They were persevering in their work. All one could hear was the crunch of the spades into the earth and the clatter of broken stones piled into heaps. They began to feel hot. Anna took off her *gunya*, then her jacket, and went on working in her faded cotton blouse.

Old Petelitsa took off his coat too, and others followed his example.

Kalina set five-minute rest periods after every hour of work. She hung her father's cracked-faced watch, which she had brought along, on a branch of a roadside tree, and when an hour was up she called the team to rest in a long drawn-out shout.

Towards the end of the day Rusinko arrived accompanied by Nemesh and some other men Anna did not know. Rusinko's huge bulk made the big dapple-grey horse he was riding look small. His boots were caked with mud and lumps of it had dried on his black coat. His face had a pinched look about it from his sleepless nights.

"Good day to you!" he called out, reining in his horse.

"The same to you, Comrade Secretary," the workmen replied in a discordant chorus.

Rusinko ran his eye over the work area and smiled:

"Good for you, comrades, you've done quite a bit of work here from what I can see. It's getting on at a smart pace!" and turning to his companions he remarked: "I should say it's as good as the Yarovets people's. What do you say?"

"Better, perhaps?" Kalina shouted boldly.

"I'm afraid," Rusinko screwed up his laughing eyes, "I'm afraid you'll comb all this road out

in twenty days instead of a month, eh? But what's the use of talking! If the people fight together there's no limit to what they can do!"

Anna looked at the secretary with a frown. "Is he joking? Or is he comforting us? Twenty days! Heavens, there's any amount of work here!"

She looked about her earnestly and realized that Rusinko was not joking at all, nor was he comforting them. Only this morning the hillside was as smooth as if the avalanche had ironed it out. And now a terrace, disappearing in the distance, had been cut out of the mountain side and it was wide enough to hold three men abreast.

Rusinko rode away. Kalina walked next to him, slipping on the wet boulders, and you could hear the secretary telling her that as from tomorrow field-kitchens would be sent out to every area, and that it would be a good idea if the people on the day shift would not go back home for the night, the way being too long and difficult. It would be better to erect shelters as temporary quarters on the higher places which were already dry.

Nemesh stayed a little longer. The old men surrounded him and wanted to know how things were getting on in the logging camp. When Nemesh told them that the fourth team after a few days down below with the "tortoise" had risen

up to the "aeroplane" again, the old men broke into a rumble of approval.

Anna listened to the conversation.

"Well, we'll do our best too, Comrade Chief," Petelitsa said importantly—his sons belonged to the fourth team—"if it weren't for the bridges..."

"Oh, those bridges!" Nemesh could not hold back the words, but he checked himself at once. It wouldn't do to worry the people unduly.

"Why, what are the bridges to you?" he suddenly flared out at Petelitsa. "Once we have the timber, we'll have the bridges. That's all there is to it!"

At any other time the old man wouldn't have thought twice about snapping back, but now, appreciating the reason for Nemesh's anger, he merely knitted his brows and pulled harder at his old pipe.

The next shift arrived from Paseka an hour later and the first teams made ready to start off home. Kalina and Anna were the last to leave. Their shoulders and legs ached with weariness. The road was oozy and difficult. They walked in silence. It was the quiet hour before dusk. Water, bubbling in all the valleys and ravines, made the only sound.

It was twilight by the time the girls reached the Paseka settlement. To make a short cut and

avoid the muddy road, they turned left and threaded their way along the stony bank of the river. The opposite, low-lying shore with its flooded meadows glistened like a far-reaching pond, with here and there long ridges of logs, black against the metal smoothness of the water.

They saw some people pottering about the logs, knee-deep in water.

"What are they up to?" Kalina wondered.

"Perhaps they're looking for firewood," Anna replied. "There's a wealth of firewood washed down."

They did, in fact, soon meet a skinny, shivering young lad in a straw hat, the kind occasionally worn in summer in lowland villages, carrying two heavy, wet logs, and grinning with a senseless, toothy smile.

Anna recognized Mikhailo, Mikola Varga's imbecile nephew. Varga assured everyone that he was keeping his "touched" nephew out of sheer pity. But Mikhailo worked like a robot from morning till night, and wore the same rags the whole year round.

"Where to, Mikhailo?" Anna asked.

Mikhailo giggled and nodded: "Taking firewood home. *Vuiku* said fetch firewood." He continued on his way, his walk unsteady, the heavy load weighing him down.



Half an hour later the two girls saw the lights of their village. When they had a few more houses to go, Anna came to an abrupt stop.

"Kalina! Did you see those people getting firewood for themselves?"

"I did, so what?"

"But it's timber from the bridges. . . ."

"That's right," Kalina said, her attention sharpened.

"And what if we collected it all, Kalina? Think how much timber has been washed down here! There's a log washed right up to my own fence. I even thought of using it for my front gate, it needs repairing."

"What's on your mind?" Kalina asked, already guessing what Anna was going to say.

"Collect all of it, see, gather it all up and use it for the bridges. . . ."

They both stood motionless for a moment or two as though afraid their idea would be shattered against something insuperable. But their thoughts raced on, and their imagination drew pictures of what could be done with the timber, collected from here, there and everywhere.

With one accord Kalina and Anna turned back, and grasping each other's hands in the darkness, they started off at a brisk walk, then broke into a run towards the Village Soviet.

The man on duty sat at his desk and for lack of anything better to do signed his name with a flourish over and over again on a sheet of paper.

Kalina strode up to the table and tucking her kerchief behind her ear, began to twirl the handle of the telephone impatiently.

"Exchange! Exchange!" she called. "Exchange! Look for Comrade Rusinko, I beg you, please. Rusinko, the Party secretary. Yes, him, him! He's either in Chornoye or in Yarovets, or perhaps he's at home...."

While the telephone girl tried to locate Rusinko, Kalina kept changing the receiver from one hand to the other. The man on duty glanced at Kalina with unblinking eyes, heaved a deep sigh and with renewed effort started exercising his hand at his intricate signature.

They found Rusinko in Snegovets. He answered the telephone and Kalina knew his voice at once.

"Comrade Secretary!" she shouted, although he could hear her very well as it was. "It's Kalina Sizak from Paseka."

"Well, what's gone wrong over there?" Rusinko asked.

"Comrade Secretary," Kalina yelled even louder. "We'll be getting timber tomorrow. Lots of timber!" And, in her excitement, she snatched

the pen out of the man's hand and flung it to the far end of the desk.

"Don't shout like that," Rusinko asked, "talk softer, I can hear you very well. What timber?"

"From the old bridges, Comrade Secretary, whatever's been washed away. People are taking it away for firewood, but why should it be used for firewood?"

"So that's what it is!" Rusinko said and suddenly broke into such merry laughter that even Anna, who stood quite a distance away from the telephone, heard it and looked anxiously at Kalina.

"Why are you laughing?" Kalina asked in disappointment. "Isn't it a good idea?"

"That's just why I'm laughing because it's good," he replied. "Very good indeed!"

"It's not my idea," Kalina put in hurriedly, "it's Anna Yatsina's. Anna Yatsina's from our village. Perhaps you'd like to talk to her? She's here."

Anna made a step back and waved her arms.

"No, no, I won't. Kalina, I won't...."

But Rusinko insisted that she should speak to him and Anna, blushing, picked up the telephone receiver for the first time in her life. She held it awkwardly in two fingers, grimacing from embarrassment and could hardly understand a word

of what Rusinko was saying to her. She guessed that he was praising her and this confused her even more. Her eyes radiant with joy, she kept repeating the same words: "It's all right, Comrade Secretary... it's all right...."

## 10

In March they built the last of the bridges. Close by the logging camp two wooden pillars rose up like watch-towers from the bottom of a deep ravine, and men suspended on ropes joined more and more rows of logs to these pillars.

The roads were already open to traffic as far as here, and now the completion of the whole project by the set date depended on the construction of this bridge.

Nemesh was there day and night, Rusinko came too. Even the woodcutters came down the mountain paths occasionally to watch the zeal with which the villagers were working and give what help they could. And although no one urged them on and no one mentioned the set date, the workmen themselves seemed to read the secret thought in everyone's mind: "Hurry up! Try harder! Hurry up!"

After her well-remembered telephone conversation, Anna joined the bridgebuilders' team.

She never went down to Paseka now, having made her arrangements with old Petrishcheva to look after her cow. Wearing her father's jack-boots, Anna waded through the water to the obstruction of timber, extricated logs and carried them to dry land. During the first few days she worked with such passionate self-forgetfulness and joy that people watching her wondered where this girl's cheerful and infectious swiftness and smartness came from?

However, when the excitement of the first days passed, Anna seemed to lose interest. She felt this new life encroaching powerfully upon her old one, and it frightened her. Anna resolved she would never give in to this new life the way she had not given in to Kalina's coaxing to join the collective farm. Her father had warned her against this, hadn't he? She remembered his wrathful: "You drop it, Anna!" and grew still more restless. She felt drawn to her cottage where everything was familiar and habitual. She wanted to leave the team, give up her work and go back to the village, but she felt that she no longer had the strength to do it. Then she tried to convince herself that whatever she was doing now she was only doing for Ivan's sake. It eased her troubled mind for a while.

Propaganda workers, visiting the construction site, stretched red bunting from tree to tree. It had these words on it: "One day means five hundred cubic metres of timber."

"Gosh, what a bothering notice," said old Petelitsa. "It keeps following me about. . . . Doesn't give you a moment's peace."

"And it's all one to me," Anna replied, "whether it's five hundred or a thousand. All I want is to get back home as soon as possible. I've got a house to look after."

Her indifference made the grumpy old man indignant. But Anna assured herself obstinately: yes, yes, she was only here for Ivan's sake. The rest did not interest her at all.

The sound of axes could be heard till late in the night. Work continued by the light of fires. While some of the men were adding logs on to the pillars, others were making planks and railings for the bridgeway, so that as soon as the foundation was finished they could start laying down the bridge.

At last rumour spread over the logging camps that the bridge would be ready on Sunday, and that lorries and carts would go across it the same day.

This news found Rusinko in one of the more distant camps where the fourth team was work-

ing. The secretary made haste to get to the bridge before dark. Ivan Sheketa volunteered to show Rusinko the way. They started down into the ravine along steep and difficult paths. Ivan walked in front, tapping the stones with his slim, carved stick, while Rusinko followed behind and Ivan could hear the laboured breathing of this indefatigable man.

Ivan was silent during the first part of the journey, not daring to address Rusinko. But at last he said:

"You know, Comrade Secretary, what I've been thinking: what if we had those electric saws up here, the kind you told us about today?"

"We shall have saws like that here, too," Rusinko replied.

"I'm sure we will," Ivan sighed, "but if we could have them now! While you were away at the camp, our fellows counted up the timber we could put out with this electric saw."

"Was it much?" Rusinko asked.

"And how! The size of it even frightened the old folks."

"But why did it frighten them?"

Ivan smiled. "With an output like that, they say, we might become jobless."

"And what do you think?"

"I think . . ." Ivan was slightly confused. "I

think that with an output like that, communism would be within easy reach!"

"You're right," Rusinko was overjoyed and even stopped for a second to get a better look at Sheketa's face.

No matter how Rusinko and Ivan hurried, night, which falls suddenly in the mountains, overtook them when they were only half-way. They turned to the left in the darkness and came out to the log cabin belonging to the first team. Rusinko agreed with Ivan that they should stay the night there and resume their journey in the morning.

The woodcutters were up with the first light of dawn. The morning happened to be a clear one. A cloudless sky showed through the leafless crowns of the beeches. Neatly stacked lumber and new stumps gleamed whitely on the high, steep hillsides. A gentle breeze carried down a sweetish smell of wet shavings. The ground in the forest glimmered with silvery rime.

After washing their faces in the brook, Rusinko and Ivan started off. All the men on the first team followed them. From every direction woodcutters came trickling down the mountain paths like rivulets. Rusinko barely managed to answer their greetings. Not alone the old and middle-aged woodcutters, but also the young boys who



tagged after them, thought it their duty to come up to Rusinko and shake his hand.

Rusinko learnt that the lorries had gone across the bridge before it was light and were due back any minute now, loaded with timber.

"We've overslept!" he winked at Ivan.

"How did we know?" Ivan was abashed. "You can't catch up with them."

Rusinko was about to go towards the unloading ground, but suddenly he heard a rumbling and several timber-carriers came into view from the direction of the bridge.

They crawled, loaded down with timber, their trailers rumbling heavily. Gravel crunched on the road under their wheels.

The woodcutters stared open-eyed at the lorries crawling past as if they had never seen them in these parts before.

"Twenty-five days, Comrade Secretary," said Sheketa.

"Yes, twenty-five," Rusinko nodded and tried to draw a mental picture of those twenty-five days.

The lorries disappeared round a bend. Before the bluish trail of smoke left by them had vanished, one of the woodcutters shouted: "They're coming!"

The builders of the bridge, their work complet-

ed, were coming down the road in a crowd, their axes, saws and spades on their shoulders, stopping to shake hands with the woodcutters and Rusinko. Their voices had a peculiar, ringing, exciting and festive sound in the pure spring air.

Anna was walking beside Petelitsa. His three sons were already hurrying towards him. Red-cheeked from the early morning frost, Anna looked about her, screwing up her eyes in the hope of seeing Ivan. And then she saw him. He stood quite close to Rusinko, tapping his carved stick against a moss-covered boulder. Anna dropped her eyes and wanted to go by, but Rusinko called to her:

"Hullo, Yatsina! Why do you walk past me like that as if we were total strangers, eh?"

Anna stopped reluctantly.

"Good morning, Comrade Secretary."

"Good morning," Rusinko answered gaily and shook Anna's hand with his own large one.

"Thank you!"

"What for?" Anna asked in surprise.

"For your work, for thinking about the good of the people."

Rusinko was thanking her and everyone heard it: both Nemesh and even Ivan, at whom Anna dared not look.

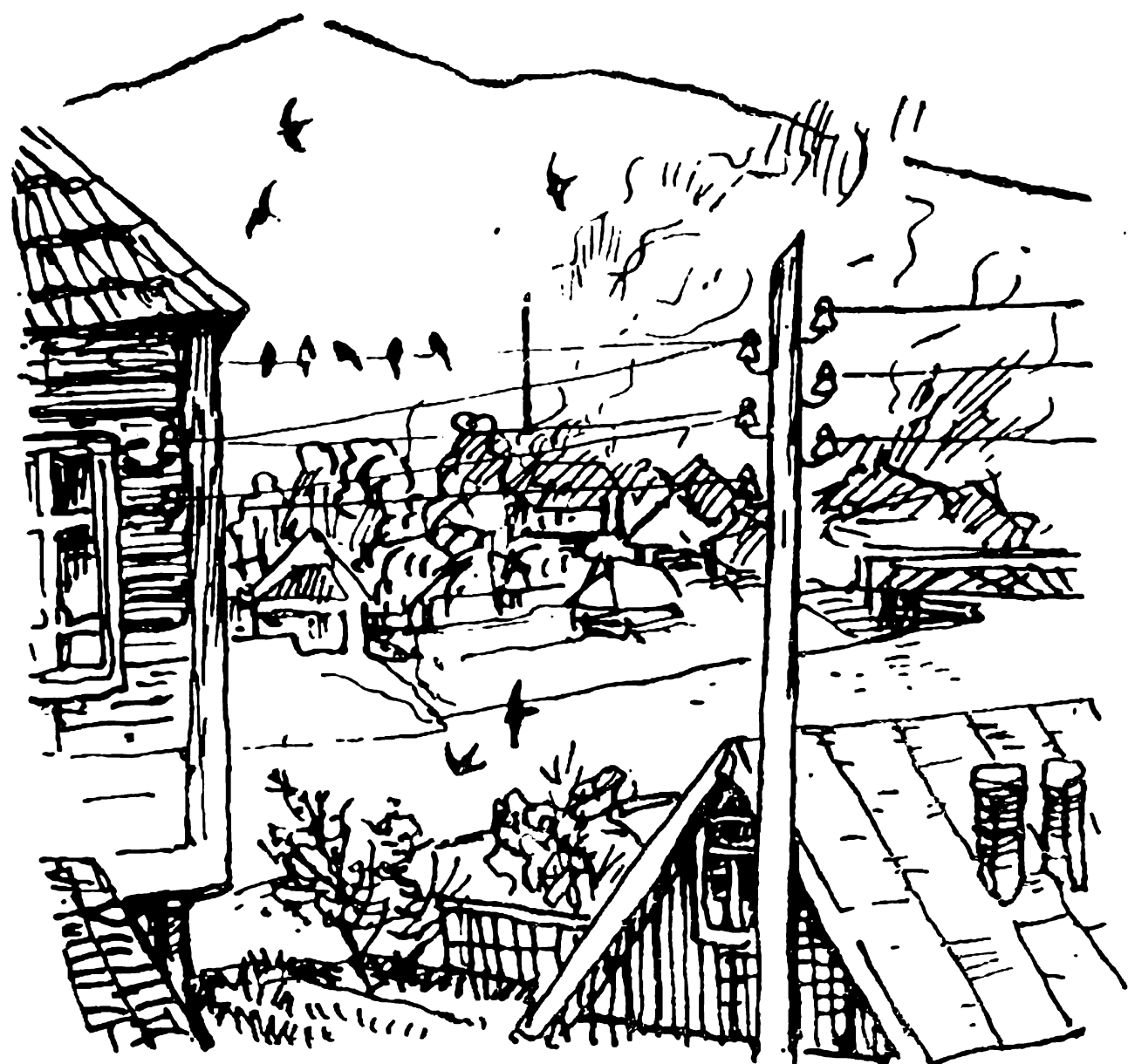
"There's no need, Comrade Secretary," she said softly, "I didn't do much...."

"You did a lot," Rusinko said gently, "but you will do even more. It was only the beginning, only the beginning...."

Anna's face brightened and her eyes were radiant with a light from within, full of faith not only in the present but also in what lay in the future.

Rusinko noticed this light which nothing could put out now. It transfigured Anna: it drove the expression of cowed submissiveness from her face, unlocked her tightly closed lips for a timid but sweet smile, and, flaming up like a rapid forest fire, it lighted up feature after feature in her suddenly beautified face.

Perhaps it was not Rusinko alone who noticed it. Perhaps....



### BY WAY OF EPILOGUE

I am leaving Snegovets at dawn on a fair day in October. A fragile autumn frost reigns over the mountains at this early hour. It seems that if you move abruptly or utter a loud word—every-

thing about you will fall to pieces and ring with a modulating, crystal-clear sound.

I have completed my work. Down below, in front of the hotel, the car is waiting to take me to Uzhgorod.

Without putting on the light I pack my manuscript into my suit-case in the wavering half-light of dawn, and listen to the faint rustling of the pages, which seem to hold a whispered conversation with each other.

And once again my memory calls up the people I have had to live with side by side at this small district hotel, close to the mountain pass. I can hear their voices, the thoughts they shared with me, which suddenly make you comprehend all the clear, timid beauty of a simple man's heart. And you rejoice in the beauty, it gladdens you like a beckoning little light in the open, and you come to realize that it is life itself, our life.

Snegovets is still asleep. The hotel guests are sleeping too. For the most part they are new, strange people to me. Among them are four drivers, who have brought their lorries all the way across the mountains from Moldavia for the famous Carpathian beech-wood; there is a retired lieutenant-colonel, now lecturer on international affairs in Uzhgorod; there sleep the telephone mechanics, who are here to lay a telephone cable

to the out-of-the-way villages. And there, turning from side to side on the end bed, his head hidden under the blanket, is Ivan Sheketa, a Piaseka woodcutter. Several years have passed since I saw him last, when I wrote the story about old Vasil Yatsina and his daughter Anna, but Ivan is still the same—slim, handsome and proud. Last night he brought his wife, Anna Yatsina, to the Snegovets hospital to give birth to their first child.

Looking at the sleeping men I'm thinking: "What hidden thoughts will these men confide to each other when the new day begins—herald of a new 'miracle'? What will they tell? What feelings, stirring in their hearts, will remain unknown to me?"

And I begin to feel sorry that I have to leave the hotel, although I am perfectly aware that life is everywhere, and people are everywhere, and a book is like life, and you cannot put a stop to it.